

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 370

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-THIRD PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2001-02

COMPRISING PERIOD
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Chronology of "The Parliamentary Debates"

The Parliamentary History contains all that can be collected of the Legislative History of this country from the Conquest to the close of the XVIIIth Century (1803), 36 vols. The chief sources whence these Debates are derived are the Constitutional History, 24 vols.; Sir Simonds D'Ewes' Journal; Debates of the Commons in 1620 and 1621; Chandler and Timberland's Debates, 22 vols.; Grey's Debates of the Commons, from 1667 to 1694, 10 vols.; Almon's Debates, 24 vols.; Debrett's Debates, 63 vols.; The Hardwicke Papers; Debates in Parliament by Dr. Johnson, &c. &c.

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Alphabetical List of Members

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Adams, Katherine (Paisley, North)
Ainger, Nicholas Richard (West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire)
Ainsworth, Peter Michael (East Surrey)
Ainsworth, Robert William (Coventry, North East)
Alexander, Douglas (Paisley, South)
Allan, Richard Beecroft (Sheffield, Hallam)
Allen, Graham William (Nottingham, North)
Amess, David Anthony Andrew (Southend, West)
Ancram, Rt. Hon. Michael Andrew (Devizes)
Anderson, Rt. Hon. Donald (Swansea, East)
Anderson, Janet (Rossendale and Darwen)
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Armstrong, Rt. Hon. Hilary Jane (North-West Durham)
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Atkins, Charlotte (Staffordshire, Moorlands)
Atkinson, David Anthony (Bournemouth, East)
Atkinson, Peter Landreth (Hexham)
Austin, John Eric (Erith and Thamesmead)

B

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Bailey, Adrian Edward (West Bromwich, West)
Baird, Vera (Redcar)
Baker, Norman John (Lewes)
Baldry, Antony Brian (Banbury)
Banks, Anthony Louis (West Ham)
Barker, Gregory Leonard George (Bexhill and Battle)
Barnes, Harold (North-East Derbyshire)
Baron, John Charles (Billericay)
Barrett, John Andrew (Edinburgh, West)
Barron, Kevin John (Rother Valley)
Battle, John (Leeds, West)
Bayley, Hugh (City of York)
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Bercow, John Simon (Buckingham)
Beresford, Sir Paul Alexander (Mole Valley)
Berry, Roger Leslie (Kingswood)
Best, Harold (Leeds, North-West)
Betts, Clive James Charles (Sheffield, Attercliffe)
Blackman, Elizabeth Marion (Erewash)
Blair, Rt. Hon. Anthony Charles Lynton (Sedgefield)
Bleas, Hazel Anne (Salford)
Blizzard, Bob (Waveney)
Blunkett, Rt. Hon. David (Sheffield, Brightside)
Blunt, Crispin Jeremy Rupert (Reigate)
Boateng, Rt. Hon. Paul Yaw (Brent, South)

Borrow, David Stanley (South Ribble)
Boswell, Timothy Eric (Daventry)
Bottomley, Peter James (Worthing, West)
Bottomley, Rt. Hon. Virginia Hilda Brunette Maxwell (South-West Surrey)
Bradley, Rt. Hon. Keith John Charles (Manchester, Withington)
Bradley, Peter Charles Stephen (The Wrekin)
Bradshaw, Benjamin Peter James (Exeter)
Brady, Graham Stuart (Altrincham and Sale, West)
Brake, Thomas Anthony (Carshalton and Wallington)
Brazier, Julian William Hendy (Canterbury)
Breed, Colin Edward (South-East Cornwall)
Brennan, Kevin Denis (Cardiff, West)
Brinton, Helen Rosemary (Peterborough)
Brooke, Annette Lesley (Mid-Dorset and North Poole)
Brown, Rt. Hon. James Gordon (Dunfermline, East)
Brown, Rt. Hon. Nicholas Hugh (Newcastle upon Tyne, East and Wallsend)
Brown, Russell Leslie (Dumfries)
Browne, Desmond Henry (Kilmarnock and Loudoun)
Browning, Angela Frances (Tiverton and Honiton)
Bruce, Malcolm Gray (Gordon)
Bryant, Christopher John (Rhondda)
Buck, Karen Patricia (Regent's Park and Kensington, North)
Burden, Richard Haines (Birmingham, Northfield)
Burgon, Colin (Elmet)
Burnett, John Patrick (Torridge and West Devon)
Burnham, Andrew Murray (Leigh)
Burns, Simon Hugh McGuigan (West Chelmsford)
Burnside, David Wilson Boyd (South Antrim)
Burstow, Paul Kenneth (Sutton and Cheam)
Burt, Alistair James Hendrie (North-East Bedfordshire)
Butterfill, John Valentine (Bournemouth, West)
Byers, Rt. Hon. Stephen John (Tyneside, North)

C

Cable, John Vincent (Twickenham)
Caborn, Rt. Hon. Richard George (Sheffield, Central)
Cairns, John David (Greenock and Inverclyde)
Calton, Patsy (Cheadle)
Cameron, David William Donald (Witney)
Campbell, Alan (Tynemouth)
Campbell, Anne (Cambridge)
Campbell, Gregory Lloyd (East Londonderry)
Campbell, Ronald (Blyth Valley)
Campbell, Rt. Hon. Walter Menzies (North-East Fife)
Cann, Jamie Charles (Ipswich)
Caplin, Ivor Keith (Hove)
Carmichael, Alexander Morrison (Orkney and Shetland)
Casale, Roger Mark (Wimbledon)
Cash, William Nigel Paul (Stone)
Caton, Martin Philip (Gower)
Cawsey, Ian Arthur (Brigg and Goole)
Challen, Colin Robert (Morley and Rothwell)
Chapman, James Keith (Wirral, South)
Chapman, Sir Sydney Brooks (Chipping Barnet)
Chaytor, David Michael (Bury, North)
Chidgey, David William George (Eastleigh)
Chope, Christopher Robert (Christchurch)

Clapham, Michael (Barnsley, West and Penistone)
 Clappison, William James (Hertsmeire)
 Clark, Lynda Margaret (Edinburgh, Pentlands)
 Clark, Paul Gordon (Gillingham)
 Clarke, Anthony Richard (Northampton, South)
 Clarke, Charles Rodway (Norwich, South)
 Clarke, Rt. Hon. Kenneth Harry (Rushcliffe)
 Clarke, Rt. Hon. Thomas (Coatbridge and Chryston)
 Clelland, David Gordon (Tyne Bridge)
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey (Cotswold)
 Clwyd, Ann (Cymon Valley)
 Coaker, Vernon Rodney (Gedling)
 Coffey, Ann (Stockport)
 Cohen, Harry Michael (Leyton and Wanstead)
 Coleman, Iain (Hammersmith and Fulham)
 Collins, Timothy William George (Westmorland and Lonsdale)
 Colman, Anthony John (Putney)
 Connarty, Michael (Falkirk, East)
 Conway, Derek Leslie (Old Bexley and Sidcup)
 Cook, Francis (Stockton, North)
 Cook, Rt. Hon. Robert (Livingston)
 Cooper, Yvette (Pontefract and Castleford)
 Corbyn, Jeremy Bernard (Islington, North)
 Cormack, Sir Patrick Thomas (South Staffordshire)
 Corston, Jean Ann (Bristol, East)
 Cotter, Brian Joseph (Weston-Super-Mare)
 Cousins, James Mackay (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central)
 Cox, Thomas Michael (Tooting)
 Cran, James Douglas (Beverley and Holderness)
 Cranston, Ross Frederick (Dudley, North)
 Crausby, David Anthony (Bolton, North-East)
 Cruddas, Jonathan (Dagenham)
 Cryer, Constance Ann (Keighley)
 Cryer, John Robert (Hornchurch)
 Cummings, John Scott (Easington)
 Cunningham, James Dolan (Coventry, South)
 Cunningham, Rt. Hon. John Anderson (Copeland)
 Cunningham, Thomas Anthony (Workington)
 Curry, Rt. Hon. David Maurice (Skipton and Ripon)
 Curtis-Thomas, Claire (Crosby)

D

Daisley, Paul Andrew (Brent, East)
 Dalyell, Tam (Linlithgow)
 Darling, Rt. Hon. Alistair Maclean (Edinburgh, Central)
 Davey, Edward Jonathon (Kingston and Surbiton)
 Davey, Valerie (Bristol, West)
 David, Wayne (Caerphilly)
 Davidson, Ian Graham (Glasgow, Pollok)
 Davies, Rt. Hon. David John Denzi! (Llanelli)
 Davies, Geraint Richard (Croydon, Central)
 Davies, John Quentin (Grantham and Stamford)
 Davis, Rt. Hon. David Michael (Haltemprice and Howden)
 Davis, Rt. Hon. Terry (Birmingham, Hodge Hill)
 Dawson, Thomas Hilton (Lancaster and Wyre)
 Dean, Janet Elizabeth Ann (Burton)
 Denham, Rt. Hon. John Yorke (Southampton, Itchen)
 Dhanda, Parmjit Singh (Gloucester)
 Dismore, Andrew Hartley (Hendon)
 Djanogly, Jonathan Simon (Huntingdon)
 Dobbin, James (Heywood and Middleton)
 Dobson, Rt. Hon. Frank Gordon (Holborn and St. Pancras)
 Dodds, Nigel Alexander (Belfast, North)
 Doherty, Pat (West Tyrone)
 Donaldson, Jeffrey Mark (Lagan Valley)
 Donohoe, Brian Harold (Cunninghame, South)
 Doran, Frank (Aberdeen, Central)

Dorrell, Rt. Hon. Stephen James (Charnwood)
 Doughty, Susan Kathleen (Guildford)
 Dowd, James Patrick (Lewisham, West)
 Drew, David Elliott (Stroud)
 Drown, Julia Kate (South Swindon)
 Duncan, Alan James Carter (Rutland and Melton)
 Duncan, Peter John (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale)
 Duncan Smith, George Iain (Chingford and Woodford Green)
 Dunwoody, Gwyneth Patricia (Crewe and Nantwich)

E

Eagle, Angela (Wallasey)
 Eagle, Maria (Liverpool, Garston)
 Edwards, Huw William Edmund (Monmouth)
 Efford, Clive Stanley (Eltham)
 Ellman, Louise (Liverpool, Riverside)
 Emsis, Jeffrey (Barnsley, East and Mexborough)
 Etherington, William (Sunderland, North)
 Evans, Nigel Martin (Ribble Valley)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Perth)

F

Fabricant, Michael Louis David (Lichfield)
 Fallon, Michael Cathel (Sevenoaks)
 Farrelly, Christopher Paul (Newcastle-under-Lyme)
 Field, Rt. Hon. Frank (Birkenhead)
 Field, Mark Christopher (Cities of London and Westminster)
 Fisher, Mark (Stoke-on-Trent, Central)
 Fitzpatrick, James (Poplar and Canning Town)
 Fitzsimons, Lorna (Rochdale)
 Flight, Howard Emerson (Arundel and South Downs)
 Flint, Caroline Louise (Don Valley)
 Flook, Adrian John (Taunton)
 Flynn, Paul Philip (Newport, West)
 Follett, Daphne Barbara (Stevenage)
 Forth, Rt. Hon. Eric (Bromley and Chislehurst)
 Foster, Rt. Hon. Derek (Bishop Auckland)
 Foster, Donald Michael Ellison (Bath)
 Foster, Michael Jabez (Hastings and Rye)
 Foster, Michael John (Worcester)
 Foulkes, George (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)
 Fox, Liam (Woodspring)
 Francis, David Hywel (Aberavon)
 Francois, Mark Gino (Rayleigh)

G

Gale, Roger James (North Thanet)
 Galloway, George (Glasgow, Kelvin)
 Gapes, Michael John (Ilford, South)
 Gardiner, Barry Strachan (Brent, North)
 Garnier, Edward Henry (Harborough)
 George, Andrew Henry (St. Ives)
 George, Rt. Hon. Bruce Thomas (Walsall, South)
 Gerrard, Neil Francis (Walthamstow)
 Gibb, Nicolas John (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton)
 Gibson, Ian (Norwich, North)
 Gidley, Sandra Julia (Romsey)
 Gildernew, Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
 Gillan, Cheryl Elise Kendall (Chesham and Amersham)
 Gilroy, Linda (Plymouth, Sutton)
 Godsiff, Roger Duncan (Birmingham, Sparkbrook and Small Heath)
 Goggins, Paul Gerard (Wythenshawe and Sale, East)

Goodman, Paul Alexander Cyril (Wycombe)
 Gray, James Whiteside (North Wiltshire)
 Grayling, Christopher Stephen (Epsom and Ewell)
 Green, Damian Howard (Ashford)
 Green, Matthew Roger (Ludlow)
 Greenway, John Robert (Ryedale)
 Grieve, Dominic Charles Roberts (Beaconsfield)
 Griffiths, Jane Patricia (Reading, East)
 Griffiths, Nigel (Edinburgh, South)
 Griffiths, Winston James (Bridgend)
 Grogan, John (Selby)
 Gummer, Rt. Hon. John Selwyn (Suffolk, Coastal)

H

Hague, Rt. Hon. William Jefferson (Richmond, Yorks)
 Hain, Peter Gerald (Neath)
 Hall, Michael Thomas (Weaver Vale)
 Hall, Patrick (Bedford)
 Hamilton, David (Midlothian)
 Hamilton, Fabian (Leeds, North-East)
 Hammond, Philip (Runnymede and Weybridge)
 Hancock, Michael Thomas (Portsmouth, South)
 Hanson, David George (Delyn)
 Harman, Rt. Hon. Harriet (Camberwell and Peckham)
 Harris, Evan Leslie (Oxford, West and Abingdon)
 Harris, Tom (Glasgow, Cathcart)
 Harvey, Nicholas Barton (North Devon)
 Haselhurst, Rt. Hon. Sir Alan Gordon Barraclough (Saffron Walden)
 Havid, David Stuart (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney)
 Hawkins, Nicholas John (Surrey Heath)
 Hayes, John Henry (South Holland and The Deepings)
 Heal, Sylvia Lloyd (Halesowen and Rowley Regis)
 Heald, Oliver (North-East Hertfordshire)
 Healey, John (Wentworth)
 Heath, David William St. John (Somerton and Frome)
 Heathcoat-Amory, Rt. Hon. David Philip (Wells)
 Henderson, Douglas John (Newcastle upon Tyne, North)
 Henderson, Ivan John (Harwich)
 Hendrick, Mark Phillip (Preston)
 Hendry, Charles (Wealden)
 Hepburn, Stephen (Jarrow)
 Heppell, John (Nottingham, East)
 Hermon, Sylvia (North Down)
 Hesford, Stephen (Wirral, West)
 Hewitt, Rt. Hon. Patricia Hope (Leicester, West)
 Heyes, David Alan (Ashton-under-Lyne)
 Hill, Keith (Streatham)
 Hinchliffe, David Martin (Wakefield)
 Hoban, Mark Gerard (Fareham)
 Hodge, Margaret Eve (Barking)
 Hoey, Catharine Letitia (Vauxhall)
 Hogg, Rt. Hon. Douglas Martin (Sleaford and North Hykeham)
 Holmes, Paul Robert (Chesterfield)
 Hood, James (Clydesdale)
 Hoon, Rt. Hon. Geoffrey William (Ashfield)
 Hope, Philip Ian (Corby)
 Hopkins, Kelvin Peter (Luton, North)
 Horam, John Rhodes (Orpington)
 Howard, Rt. Hon. Michael (Folkestone and Hythe)
 Howarth, Rt. Hon. Alan Thomas (Newport, East)
 Howarth, George Edward (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East)
 Howarth, James Gerald Douglas (Aldershot)
 Howells, Kim Scott (Pontypridd)
 Hoyle, Lindsay Harvey (Chorley)
 Hughes, Beverley June (Stretford and Urmston)

Hughes, Kevin Michael (Doncaster, North)
 Hughes, Simon Henry Ward (Southwark, North and Bermondsey)
 Humble, Jovanka Joan (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood)
 Hume, John (Foyle)
 Hunter, Andrew Robert Frederick (Basingstoke)
 Hurst, Alan Arthur (Braintree)
 Hutton, John Matthew Patrick (Barrow and Furness)

I

Iddon, Brian (Bolton, South-East)
 Illsley, Eric Evelyn (Barnsley, Central)
 Ingram, Rt. Hon. Adam (East Kilbride)

J

Jack, Rt. Hon. John Michael (Fylde)
 Jackson, Glenda May (Hampstead and Highgate)
 Jackson, Helen Margaret (Sheffield, Hillsborough)
 Jackson, Robert Victor (Wantage)
 Jamieson, David Charles (Plymouth, Devonport)
 Jenkin, Bernard Christison (North Essex)
 Jenkins, Brian David (Tamworth)
 Johnson, Alan Arthur (Hull, West and Hessle)
 Johnson, Alexander Boris (Henley)
 Johnson, Melanie Jane (Welwyn Hatfield)
 Jones, Helen Mary (Warrington, North)
 Jones, Jon Owen (Cardiff, Central)
 Jones, Kevan David (North Durham)
 Jones, Lynne Mary (Birmingham, Selly Oak)
 Jones, Martyn David (Clwyd, South)
 Jones, Nigel David (Cheltenham)
 Jowell, Rt. Hon. Tessa Jane (Dulwich and West Norwood)
 Joyce, Eric (Falkirk, West)

K

Kaufman, Rt. Hon. Gerald Bernard (Manchester, Gorton)
 Keeble, Sally Curtis (Northampton, North)
 Keen, Alan (Feltham and Heston)
 Keen, Ann Lloyd (Brentford and Isleworth)
 Keetch, Paul Stuart (Hereford)
 Kelly, Ruth Maria (Bolton, West)
 Kemp, Fraser (Houghton and Washington, East)
 Kennedy, Rt. Hon. Charles Peter (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West)
 Kennedy, Jane Elizabeth (Liverpool, Wavertree)
 Key, Robert Simon (Salisbury)
 Khabra, Piara Singh (Ealing, Southall)
 Kidney, David Neil (Stafford)
 Kilfoyle, Peter (Liverpool, Walton)
 King, Andrew (Rugby and Kenilworth)
 King, Oona Tamsyn (Bethnal Green and Bow)
 Kirkbride, Julie (Bromsgrove)
 Kirkwood, Archibald Johnstone (Roxburgh and Berwickshire)
 Knight, Rt. Hon. Gregory (East Yorkshire)
 Knight, Jim (South Dorset)
 Kumar, Ashok (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East)

L

Ladyman, Stephen John (South Thanet)
 Laing, Eleanor Fulton (Epping Forest)

Lait, Jacqueline Anne Harkness (Beckenham)
 Lamb, Norman Peter (North Norfolk)
 Lammy, David Lindon (Tottenham)
 Lansley, Andrew David (South Cambridgeshire)
 Lawrence, Jacqueline Rita (Preseli Pembrokeshire)
 Laws, David Anthony (Yeovil)
 Laxton, Robert (Derby, North)
 Lazarowicz, Marek Jerzy (Edinburgh, North and Leith)
 Leigh, Edward Julian Egerton (Gainsborough)
 Lepper, David (Brighton, Pavilion)
 Leslie, Christopher Michael (Shipley)
 Letwin, Oliver (West Dorset)
 Levitt, Tom (High Peak)
 Lewis, Ivan (Bury, South)
 Lewis, Julian Murray (New Forest, East)
 Lewis, Terence (Worsley)
 Liddell, Rt. Hon. Helen (Airdrie and Shotts)
 Liddell-Grainger, Ian Richard (Bridgwater)
 Lidington, David Roy (Aylesbury)
 Lilley, Rt. Hon. Peter Bruce (Hitchin and Harpenden)
 Linton, Martin (Battersea)
 Lloyd, Anthony Joseph (Manchester, Central)
 Llwyd, Elfyn (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy)
 Lord, Sir Michael Nicholson (Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North)
 Loughton, Timothy Paul (East Worthing and Shoreham)
 Love, Andrew (Edmonton)
 Lucas, Ian Colin (Wrexham)
 Luff, Peter James (Mid-Worcestershire)
 Luke, Iain (Dundee, East)
 Lyons, John (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)

M

McAvoy, Thomas McLaughlin (Glasgow, Rutherglen)
 McCabe, Stephen James (Birmingham, Hall Green)
 McCafferty, Christine (Calder Valley)
 McCartney, Rt. Hon. Ian (Makerfield)
 McDonagh, Siobhain Ann (Mitcham and Morden)
 Macdonald, Calum Alistair (Western Isles)
 McDonnell, John Martin (Hayes and Harlington)
 MacDougall, John William (Central Fife)
 McFall, John (Dumbarton)
 McGrady, Eddie (South Down)
 McGuinness, Martin (Mid-Ulster)
 McGuire, Anne (Stirling)
 McIntosh, Anne Caroline Ballingall (Vale of York)
 McIsaac, Shona (Cleethorpes)
 Mackay, Rt. Hon. Andrew James (Bracknell)
 McKechin, Ann (Glasgow, Maryhill)
 McKenna, Rosemary (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth)
 Mackinlay, Andrew (Thurrock)
 Maclean, Rt. Hon. David John (Penrith and The Border)
 McLoughlin, Patrick Allen (West Derbyshire)
 McNamara, Kevin (Hull, North)
 McNulty, Anthony James (Harrow, East)
 MacShane, Denis (Rotherham)
 Mactaggart, Fiona Margaret (Slough)
 McWalter, Tony (Hemel Hempstead)
 McWilliam, John David (Blaydon)
 Mahmood, Khalid (Birmingham, Perry Barr)
 Mahon, Alice (Halifax)
 Malins, Humfrey Jonathon (Woking)
 Mallaber, Judy (Amber Valley)
 Mallon, Seamus (Newry and Armagh)
 Mandelson, Rt. Hon. Peter Benjamin (Hartlepool)
 Mann, John (Bassetlaw)
 Maples, John Cradock (Stratford-on-Avon)
 Marris, Robert Howard (Wolverhampton, South-West)

Marsden, Gordon (Blackpool, South)
 Marsden, Paul William Barry (Shrewsbury and Atcham)
 Marshall, David (Glasgow, Shettleston)
 Marshall, James (Leicester, South)
 Marshall-Andrews, Robert Graham (Medway)
 Martin, Rt. Hon. Michael John (Glasgow, Springburn)
 Martlew, Eric Anthony (Carlisle)
 Mates, Michael John (East Hampshire)
 Maude, Rt. Hon. Francis Anthony Aylmer (Horsham)
 Mawhinney, Rt. Hon. Sir Brian Stanley (North-West Cambridgeshire)
 May, Theresa Mary (Maidenhead)
 Meacher, Rt. Hon. Michael Hugh (Oldham, West and Royton)
 Meale, Joseph Alan (Mansfield)
 Mercer, Patrick John (Newark)
 Merron, Gillian Joanna (Lincoln)
 Michael, Rt. Hon. Alun Edward (Cardiff, South and Penarth)
 Milburn, Rt. Hon. Alan (Darlington)
 Miliband, David Wright (South Shields)
 Miller, Andrew Peter (Ellesmere Port and Neston)
 Mitchell, Andrew John Bower (Sutton Coldfield)
 Mitchell, Austin Vernon (Great Grimsby)
 Moffatt, Laura Jean (Crawley)
 Moonie, Lewis George (Kirkcaldy)
 Moore, Michael Kevin (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale)
 Moran, Margaret (Luton, South)
 Morgan, Julie (Cardiff, North)
 Morley, Elliot Anthony (Scunthorpe)
 Morris, Rt. Hon. Estelle (Birmingham, Yardley)
 Moss, Malcolm Douglas (North-East Cambridgeshire)
 Mountford, Kali Carol Jean (Colne Valley)
 Mudie, George Edward (Leeds, East)
 Mullin, Christopher John (Sunderland, South)
 Munn, Margaret Patricia (Sheffield, Heeley)
 Murphy, Denis (Wansbeck)
 Murphy, Jim (Eastwood)
 Murphy, Rt. Hon. Paul Peter (Torfaen)
 Murrison, Andrew William (Westbury)

N

Naysmith, John Douglas (Bristol, North-West)
 Norman, Archibald John (Tunbridge Wells)
 Norris, Dan (Wansdyke)

O

Oaten, Mark (Winchester)
 O'Brien, Michael (North Warwickshire)
 O'Brien, Stephen Rothwell (Eddisbury)
 O'Brien, William (Normanton)
 O'Hara, Edward (Knowsley, South)
 Olnier, William John (Nuneaton)
 O'Neill, Martin John (Ochil)
 Öpik, Lembit (Montgomeryshire)
 Organ, Diana Mary (Forest of Dean)
 Osborne, George Gideon Oliver (Tatton)
 Osborne, Sandra (Ayr)
 Ottaway, Richard Geoffrey James (Croydon, South)
 Owen, Albert (Ynys Môn)

P

Page, Richard Lewis (South-West Hertfordshire)
 Paice, James Edward Thornton (South-East Cambridgeshire)

Paisley, The Reverend Ian Richard Kyle (North Antrim)
 Palmer, Nicholas Douglas (Broxtowe)
 Paterson, Owen William (North Shropshire)
 Pearson, Ian Phares (Dudley, South)
 Perham, Linda (Ilford, North)
 Picking, Anne (East Lothian)
 Pickles, Eric Jack (Brentwood and Ongar)
 Pickthall, Colin (West Lancashire)
 Pike, Peter Leslie (Burnley)
 Plaskitt, James Andrew (Warwick and Leamington)
 Pollard, Kerry Patrick (St. Albans)
 Pond, Christopher Richard (Gravesham)
 Pope, Gregory James (Hyndburn)
 Portillo, Rt. Hon. Michael-Denzil Xavier (Kensington and Chelsea)
 Pound, Stephen Pelham (Ealing, North)
 Powell, Sir Raymond (Ogmore)
 Prentice, Bridget (Lewisham, East)
 Prentice, Gordon (Pendle)
 Prescott, Rt. Hon. John Leslie (Hull, East)
 Price, Adam (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr)
 Primarolo, Dawn (Bristol, South)
 Prisk, Mark (Hertford and Stortford)
 Prosser, Gwynfor Mathews (Dover)
 Pugh, John David (Southport)
 Purchase, Kenneth (Wolverhampton, North-East)
 Purnell, James Mark Dakin (Stalybridge and Hyde)

Q

Quin, Rt. Hon. Joyce Gwendolen (Gateshead, East and Washington, West)
 Quinn, Lawrence William (Scarborough and Whitby)

R

Rammell, William Ernest (Harlow)
 Randall, Alexander John (Uxbridge)
 Rapson, Sydney Norman John (Portsmouth, North)
 Raynsford, Rt. Hon. Wyvill Richard Nicolls (Greenwich and Woolwich)
 Redwood, Rt. Hon. John Alan (Wokingham)
 Reed, Andrew John (Loughborough)
 Reid, Alan (Argyll and Bute)
 Reid, Rt. Hon. John (Hamilton, North and Bellshill)
 Rendel, David Digby (Newbury)
 Robathan, Andrew Robert George (Blaby)
 Robertson, Angus (Moray)
 Robertson, Hugh (Faversham and Mid-Kent)
 Robertson, John (Glasgow, Anniesland)
 Robertson, Laurence Anthony (Tewkesbury)
 Robinson, Geoffrey (Coventry, North-West)
 Robinson, Iris (Strangford)
 Robinson, Peter David (Belfast, East)
 Roche, Barbara Maureen (Hornsey and Wood Green)
 Roe, Marion Audrey (Broxbourne)
 Rooney, Terence Henry (Bradford, North)
 Rosindell, Andrew Richard (Romford)
 Ross, Ernest (Dundee, West)
 Roy, Frank (Motherwell and Wishaw)
 Ruane, Christopher Shaun (Vale of Clwyd)
 Ruddock, Joan Mary (Lewisham, Deptford)
 Ruffley, David Laurie (Bury St. Edmunds)
 Russell, Christine Margaret (City of Chester)
 Russell, Robert Edward (Colchester)
 Ryan, Joan Marie (Enfield, North)

S

Salmond, Alex Elliot Anderson (Banff and Buchan)
 Salter, Martin John (Reading, West)
 Sanders, Adrian Mark (Torbay)
 Sarwar, Mohammad (Glasgow, Govan)
 Savidge, Malcolm Kemp (Aberdeen, North)
 Sawford, Philip Andrew (Kettering)
 Sayeed, Jonathan (Mid-Bedfordshire)
 Sedgemore, Brian Charles John (Hackney, South and Shoreditch)
 Selous, Andrew Edmund Armstrong (South-West Bedfordshire)
 Shaw, Jonathan Rowland (Chatham and Aylesford)
 Sheerman, Barry (Huddersfield)
 Shephard, Rt. Hon. Gillian Patricia (South-West Norfolk)
 Shepherd, Richard Charles Scrimgeour (Aldridge-Brownhills)
 Sheridan, James (West Renfrewshire)
 Shipley, Debra Ann (Stourbridge)
 Short, Rt. Hon. Clare (Birmingham, Ladywood)
 Simmonds, Mark Jonathon Mortlock (Boston and Skegness)
 Simon, Siôn Llewelyn (Birmingham, Erdington)
 Simpson, Alan John (Nottingham, South)
 Simpson, Keith Robert (Mid-Norfolk)
 Singh, Marsha (Bradford, West)
 Skinner, Dennis Edward (Bolsover)
 Smith, Rt. Hon. Andrew David (Oxford, East)
 Smith, Angela Evans (Basildon)
 Smith, Rt. Hon. Christopher Robert (Islington, South and Finsbury)
 Smith, Geraldine (Morecambe and Lunesdale)
 Smith, Jacqueline Jill (Redditch)
 Smith, John William Patrick (Vale of Glamorgan)
 Smith, Llewellyn Thomas (Blaenau Gwent)
 Smith, Sir Robert (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine)
 Smyth, The Reverend William Martin (Belfast, South)
 Soames, Arthur Nicholas Winston (Mid-Sussex)
 Soley, Clive Stafford (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush)
 Southworth, Helen Mary (Warrington, South)
 Spellar, John Francis (Warley)
 Spelman, Caroline Alice (Meriden)
 Spicer, Sir Michael William Hardy (West Worcestershire)
 Spink, Robert Michael (Castle Point)
 Spring, Richard John Grenville (West Suffolk)
 Squire, Rachel Anne (Dunfermline, West)
 Stanley, Rt. Hon. Sir John Paul (Tonbridge and Malling)
 Starkey, Phyllis Margaret (Milton Keynes, South-West)
 Steen, Anthony David (Totnes)
 Steinberg, Gerald Neil (City of Durham)
 Stevenson, George William (Stoke-on-Trent, South)
 Stewart, David John (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber)
 Stewart, Ian (Eccles)
 Stinchcombe, Paul David (Wellingborough)
 Stoate, Howard Geoffrey Alvan (Dartford)
 Strang, Rt. Hon. Gavin Steel (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh)
 Straw, Rt. Hon. John Whitaker (Blackburn)
 Streeter, Gary Nicholas (South-West Devon)
 Stringer, Graham Eric (Manchester, Blackley)
 Stuart, Gisela Gschaidner (Birmingham, Edgbaston)
 Stunell, Andrew (Hazel Grove)
 Sutcliffe, Gerald (Bradford, South)
 Swayne, Desmond Angus (New Forest, West)
 Swire, Hugo (East Devon)
 Syms, Robert Andrew Raymond (Poole)

T

Tami, Mark Richard (Alyn and Deeside)
 Tapsell, Sir Peter Hannay Bailey (Louth and Horncastle)

Taylor, Dari Jean (Stockton, South)
 Taylor, David Leslie (North-West Leicestershire)
 Taylor, Sir Edward MacMillan (Rochford and Southend, East)
 Taylor, Ian Colin (Esher and Walton)
 Taylor, John Mark (Solihull)
 Taylor, Matthew Owen John (Truro and St. Austell)
 Taylor, Richard Thomas (Wyre Forest)
 Taylor, Rt. Hon. Winifred Ann (Dewsbury)
 Thomas, Gareth (Clwyd, West)
 Thomas, Gareth Richard (Harrow, West)
 Thomas, Simon (Ceredigion)
 Thurso, Viscount John Archibald (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross)
 Timms, Stephen Creswell (East Ham)
 Tipping, Simon Patrick (Sherwood)
 Todd, Mark Wainwright (South Derbyshire)
 Tonge, Jennifer Louise (Richmond Park)
 Touhig, James Donnelly (Islwyn)
 Tredinnick, David Arthur Stephen (Bosworth)
 Trend, Michael St. John (Windsor)
 Trickett, Jon Hedley (Hemsworth)
 Trimble, Rt. Hon. David (Upper Bann)
 Truswell, Paul Anthony (Pudsey)
 Turner, Andrew John (Isle of Wight)
 Turner, Dennis (Wolverhampton, South-East)
 Turner, Desmond Stanley (Brighton, Kemptown)
 Turner, Neil (Wigan)
 Twigg, John Derek (Halton)
 Twigg, Stephen (Enfield, Southgate)
 Tyler, Paul (North Cornwall)
 Tynan, William (Hamilton, South)
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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-THIRD PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2001]

FIFTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 376

FIRST VOLUME OF SESSION 2001-2002

House of Commons

Wednesday 13 June 2001

The House being met; and it being the first day of the meeting of this Parliament, pursuant to Proclamation, WILLIAM ROBERT McKAY, ESQUIRE, CB, Clerk of the House of Commons, ROGER BLAKEMORE SANDS, ESQUIRE, Clerk Assistant, and HELEN ELIZABETH IRWIN, Principal Clerk of the Table Office, attending in the House, and the other Clerks attending, according to their duty, SIR HAYDEN PHILLIPS, KCB, Clerk of the Crown in Chancery in Great Britain, delivered to the said WILLIAM ROBERT McKAY a book containing a list of the names of the Members returned to serve in this Parliament.

Several of the Members repaired to their seats.

MR. TAM DALYELL took the Chair, pursuant to Standing Order No. 1 (Election of the Speaker: Member presiding).

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners.

The House went; and a Commission having been read for opening and holding the Parliament, the Lords Commissioners directed the House to proceed to the Election of a Speaker, and to present the Speaker-Elect tomorrow, in the House of Peers, for the Royal Approbation.

And the House having returned:—

Election of Speaker

2.49 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Under the provisions of Standing Order No. 1A, I am now required to ascertain whether Mr. Michael J. Martin is willing to be chosen as Speaker.

Mr. Michael J. Martin (Glasgow, Springburn): I know how new Back Benchers feel. Father of the House, I submit myself to the will of the House, as is the ancient custom. In doing so, I wish to thank the electors of Glasgow, Springburn for electing me for the sixth successive term.

Campaigning as a Speaker seeking re-election is no easy matter. There is no party banner, so we had to find a trademark, and it was agreed that the friends of Mr. Speaker would put a photograph of me in my formal clothes on every leaflet that was issued. We thought that that was a good idea until one of the electors said to me, "I hope you don't mind me asking, Mr. Martin, but were you ever a minister in the High Carntyne Church of Scotland?" Our posters carried the same photograph, and one gentleman said to me, "I hope you get the job. It will give you something to do when you're down in London."

May I thank the three main political parties for supporting my campaign? I am very grateful to them indeed. I am very proud of the people of Glasgow, Springburn, and I hope that I will always be remembered as a constituency Member of Parliament more than anything else.

Under the new procedures of the House, I will take the opportunity now to express my personal gratitude to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). He has been exceptionally kind to me from the day and hour when I became Speaker, and it is very much appreciated. May I also single out the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen)? I am glad to see her in the Chamber today. She has always been a great source of support.

[Mr. Michael J. Martin]

May I also, Father of the House, congratulate you on becoming Father of the House? You came to the House in 1962, and you have become a first-class parliamentarian, someone whom Back Benchers, particularly new Back Benchers, can look up to. You have always been renowned for using your skills to hold many Governments to account, and I am sure that that will not change. I hope that you make a full and speedy recovery.

The House owes a debt of gratitude to the Chairman of Ways and Means and to the First and Second Deputy Speakers. They all work very long, hard hours for the House.

I welcome all Members to the House, and I congratulate them on being elected. I welcome all the new Members, and I hope that they will have a very happy parliamentary career. There will be robust debate and differing points of view, but I can assure them that, before long, they will make friends in the House from parties other than their own. The best advice that I can give to new Members is: never hesitate to seek advice from the Speaker, from colleagues and, of course, from the staff of the House.

When speaking of the staff of the House, I would like to put on record my thanks to Mr. Bill McKay, the Clerk of the House, and Sir Nicolas Bevan, my secretary. Their assistance has been invaluable.

I said last October:

"A Speaker has a clear duty to every section of the House, especially to Back Benchers, the minority parties and the Opposition parties . . . the Speaker's duty is to serve the House, not the Executive".—[*Official Report*, 23 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 14.]

I still hold those views. I come to the Chamber every evening so that I can keep in touch with Members. A Speaker should always be approachable; that is why I have never refused a Back Bencher a meeting.

Life for a Speaker outside the Chamber can sometimes be isolated. I should like to thank my wife, Mary, who has ensured that I have a family life here in Speaker's House. I thank her because it would be very lonely indeed to come down to London alone every week, and I am aware that she has had to leave her family, her friends and our grandson.

It is a great honour to be elected Speaker. The House will decide the motion. I take nothing for granted. I can only assure each and every Member that I will always strive to be fair.

2.56 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): I beg to move,

That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

Mr. Dalyell, I begin by congratulating you on your accession as Father of the House. Given your commitment to the House and your knowledge of how to use it effectively, it gives all of us pleasure to see you supervising our proceedings today. I, too, wish you a full and speedy recovery. I also hope that you will continue to be as irreverent to those on your Front Bench as your predecessor as Father of the House was to mine. [Laughter.]

As we meet this afternoon, there are two important vacancies in our political institutions, and I am happy to make a nomination for one of them. In commending the

right hon. Member for Glasgow, Springburn (Mr. Martin) as Speaker, I congratulate him on his re-election to Parliament. Although his election was contested, I suspect that he did not experience the aggravation that the rest of us suffered in getting here. I mention in passing that we in North-West Hampshire saw a new form of co-operation between the other two parties: the Labour party ran a low-key campaign to let the Liberal Democrats have a clear shot at me; and the Liberal Democrats ran a low-key campaign to give Labour a shot. [Laughter.] I am happy to say that my majority increased to more than 12,000.

There are two reasons why I move the motion, the first of which is continuity. I do not believe that our Speaker should be put into play at the beginning of every Parliament. I can do no better than quote the second report of the Select Committee on Procedure, published in February:

"In our view it would be undesirable in these circumstances for a multi-candidate ballot to take place automatically. As we have seen, since the middle of the nineteenth century there has been a strong presumption that a Speaker once elected by the House is not subsequently challenged. If it were to become accepted that a change in the composition of the House following a General Election were as a matter of course to lead to a change in the occupancy of the Chair, we believe there are grave dangers that the office itself would be destabilised and in danger of becoming politicised. Equally, however, we believe it is important that the House should not be denied the right to change its Speaker, however unlikely it may be that that right will be exercised."

I agree with that sentiment, as did the House when it agreed to change our procedures. Although the Speaker should be validated, there should be a presumption against challenging the incumbent.

Continuity is not the only reason. If we were starting from scratch, I believe that the House would choose the right hon. Member for Springburn as its Speaker today. His long service in the House and deep roots in the Back Benches, his work on the Chairmen's Panel and domestic Committees, his experience as Deputy Speaker, his genial and approachable manner, underpinned by a deep affection and commitment to the House—all those qualities strike a chord with the House. That commitment was confirmed in his acceptance speech last October and reinforced in the statement that we have just heard, which was greatly welcomed.

All Speakers develop their own style, and we saw the right hon. Member for Springburn develop his in the previous Parliament: a more approachable, informal style of Speaker, mixing with Members in the Tea Room and elsewhere, no wig or silk stockings—rather like the Scandinavian approach to the monarchy, but so far without the bicycle.

A key role lies ahead for Mr. Speaker in this Parliament. There is a strong view that the House should reassert the accountability of the Executive to Parliament. A growing number of hon. Members want the House to be more relevant to the concerns of those whom we represent, more effective in what it does, and a better link between Government and governed. The right hon. Member for Springburn is well qualified to supervise and manage that debate during this Parliament. I believe that he is entitled to support from the whole House in that role.

The House will understand why I was unable to propose the right hon. Member for Springburn last time, but I have no hesitation in proposing him today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

Whereupon Mr. TAM DALYELL left the Chair, and Mr. MICHAEL J. MARTIN was taken out of his place and conducted to the Chair by Sir George Young and Ann Keen. [Applause.]

Mr. Speaker-Elect (*standing on the upper step*): Before I take the Chair as Speaker-Elect, I wish to thank the House for the honour that has again been bestowed on me. I am aware that it is the greatest honour that the House can give to any of its Members. I pray that I shall justify its continuing confidence, and I propose to do all within my power to preserve and cherish its traditions. I ask for your prayers.

3.3 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): Mr. Speaker-Elect, it is a great pleasure to congratulate you on your return to the Chair of the House. I think I speak for all Members when I say it is also a great pleasure for all of us that we have completed your election for a second time in rather shorter order than the six hours that it took us the first time.

May I add my congratulations to my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), on becoming Father of the House? No hon. Member has shown greater affection for the traditions of the House or carried out his duties as a Member with greater diligence than my hon. Friend. As a fellow West Lothian Member of Parliament, perhaps I can explain on his behalf to the House that his injury is a tribute to the diligence with which he pursues his constituency office, as it was incurred with an excess of enthusiasm at a meeting of the Linlithgow football team. It therefore was an asset, not a liability, in the recent election.

Mr. Speaker-Elect, there have been only 155 Speakers before you in the many centuries of your office. When Speaker Yelverton in 1597 was asked to describe the necessary qualities of a Speaker, he replied:

"A man big and comely, his carriage majestic, his nature haughty, and his purse plentiful."

Fortunately, the characteristics of the Speaker have changed over the subsequent four centuries. For myself, I am relieved that we no longer expect our Speaker to be haughty, just as you must be relieved that the House does not expect your purse to be plentiful.

Over the past seven months, you have shown all the necessary qualities of a modern Speaker. We could have expected no less from a Speaker who has brought to the Chair of the Chamber one of the longest records of service on the Chairmen's Panel. You have been fair but firm; you have turned aside confrontation with humour; and you have got the better of those unwise enough to challenge your authority. Many an awkward moment has been defused with your trademark catch phrase, "It's no' nice."

Since you came to office, your voice has become familiar in households across our country. You spoke for all your Scottish compatriots in the Chamber when you magnificently brushed aside an impertinent question from the BBC on your accent with the retort,

"I don't have an accent; other people have an accent".

Yours is of course an accent which would normally lend authority to one of the traditional roles of the Speaker: the selection of a Scotch whisky for the Speaker's brand. For you, though, as a teetotaler, that selection presented some obvious difficulties. Your solution delighted the Members whom you invited on to an all-party committee to carry out extensive research and tasting on your behalf.

Not always believing that we get the press that we deserve is of course a frequent experience of Members of this House—even if the rest of the country thinks that we get the press that we richly deserve. If ever in this Parliament the Lobby dares hint at criticism of our Speaker, it can only be because as Chairman of the Administration Committee you banned Lobby correspondents from the Terrace of the Commons unless personally supervised. You thereby liberated a grateful House to relax in privacy on the Terrace in these summer months.

Both you and I are now of that age when we share that puzzling sensation after each election that Members of Parliament seem to be getting younger than we remember. To an even younger Chamber than before, your commitment that families will be remembered in the proceedings of the House is particularly welcome. That commitment comes, of course, from the affection and importance that you attach to your own family. Those who know you well know also that no words of congratulations to you would be complete unless they also expressed appreciation of Mary, your wife, for her support to you in your role here and in your constituency.

Mr. Speaker-Elect, on first taking the Chair, you said that the Speaker had a clear duty to every side of the House, especially to the Back Benchers. It is because you have served the whole House with impartiality that the whole House has today returned you to the Chair unanimously. Your colleagues and your friends congratulate you on it.

3.7 pm

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): On behalf of all my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Opposition Benches, I offer our sincerest congratulations to you, Mr. Speaker-Elect, on your re-election. Many colleagues on both sides of the House will share my relief that it was accompanied by less controversy and took dramatically less time than your election in October. Your unanimous re-election underlines the important constitutional fact that you are now very much Speaker of the whole of the House of Commons.

I add the Opposition's congratulations to those expressed to the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), who, as a highly active Back Bench and champion of so many causes over decades, is in every sense fully qualified for the post.

It is also a great pleasure to be the first to congratulate the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) on his appointment as Leader of the House of Commons. We learned from the newspapers that—apparently—he has been unable to express all his real views as Foreign Secretary over the past four years. My hon. Friends are

[*Mr. William Hague*]

much looking forward to asking him for all his real views as Leader of the House during a succession of Question Times and statements over coming months.

On these occasions, Mr. Speaker-Elect, a great deal is usually made of the distinctive parliamentary existence of the holder of your great office that results from the need to cut yourself off from previous party affiliations. You have indeed cut yourself off from party affiliations and, as has been mentioned, served this House impartially. It has always been a tradition of Speakers that they do not visit the Tea Room and the bars as part of that procedure. You have created a new tradition by being available and visiting the Tea Room and bars, but not having a drink there. That may keep you happy, although it is incomprehensible to the rest of us, but we are delighted that you have amended the traditions in that respect.

On a more serious point, you are the custodian of the rules, privileges and traditions of this House. As the many newly elected Members will soon learn, we all look to you as the independent champion of all parties in the House and of the rights of all hon. Members. As you know, I have always made a particular point about protecting the rights of the Opposition Front Bench: come to think of it, though, the rights of Back Benchers need protecting too—especially those who have not spoken from the Back Benches for a long time. I know that you will protect their rights in this Parliament.

There are also those occasions of high drama, Mr. Speaker-Elect, when votes are tied and it falls to you to use your casting vote, although I admit that it is not immediately obvious that that will be necessary in a large number of instances. You never know; we will be working on it from this side of the House. I hope that the fact that the Government have such a majority will not deter hon. Members on both sides of the House from doing the job that they have been sent here to do: to hold the Government to account.

Like so many past and present Members, you and I care passionately about the House of Commons and the standing in which it is held throughout the country. That is why I for one deeply regret the diminution of its importance and reputation, which has accelerated—although it did not begin—in recent years. I cannot be alone in thinking that that decline contributed in some ways to the disconnection between the public and Parliament that was highlighted by the lamentably low voter turnout in the general election last week.

Last October, I expressed the hope that you would robustly resist all attempts to downgrade, marginalise or bypass the House of Commons: I repeat that today. Few things would give me—and, I hope, hon. Members from all parties—greater satisfaction in politics than to see this House restored to the centre of our national life. The great issues that will come before us during the next few years, some of which may be of supreme importance to the way in which our country is governed, should be fully scrutinised and debated first and foremost in this Chamber.

On a personal note, just as you are about to resume your duties, I am planning to relinquish mine as Leader of the Opposition, although I shall carry them out for a few weeks more. I should like to thank you for the courtesy and kindness that you have shown me behind the

scenes since you took the Chair of this House last October. I am sure that your advice will continue to be of enormous benefit to hon. Members throughout the House.

Again, Mr. Speaker-Elect, I congratulate you and wish you well for what undoubtedly promises to be an important and demanding period in our parliamentary history.

3.12 pm

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Mr. Speaker-Elect, may I entirely associate my right hon. and hon. Friends with the personal and unanimous congratulations that the House has recorded on your re-election as Speaker this afternoon? We wish you all possible success for the forthcoming Parliament.

You will remember something about which we have joked privately since your first election. At that time, I recalled our first encounter, when I was a schoolboy and you were on a picket line in your then capacity as a NUPE—National Union of Public Employees—regional official. The unanimous endorsement of the House must mean that we have witnessed the ultimate triumph of NUPE man this afternoon. We congratulate you on that.

I should like to take this opportunity also to congratulate the new Father of the House, whose courtesy and advice to all of us—especially those who have entered the House over the years as new Members—has been unstinting and much appreciated. It is a great happiness to see him occupy that position on behalf of us all, but for me that happiness is tinged with one wee regret: I shall dearly miss his distinguished predecessor, Sir Edward Heath, at Prime Minister's questions. I do not have any ambition as Lib Dem leader to write a diary and publish it. The book that I want to write and publish one day is the off-the-record commentary of Sir Edward Heath between 3 o'clock and 3.30 every Wednesday afternoon on the parliamentary Conservative party and the questions that its members put to the Prime Minister of the day. I shall miss the sensation when Sir Edward was notably upset or distressed by the viewpoints given by one of his own. He had a tendency to expel a great sigh of frustration, which tended to move me significantly along the Bench. I shall miss those noises.

We must all share a sense of disappointment, if not foreboding, about the lack of engagement of so many of our fellow citizens in the election. That being so, I hope that early steps will be taken to examine our procedures and practices in this place to ensure that they are as relevant and comprehensible as possible to those outside. There is a danger that all of us in all parties will be engulfed if we are not careful.

Given the balance of the outcome of the election, I hope that you, Mr. Speaker-Elect, your senior officials and the new Leader of the House will give fresh consideration to the procedures of the House to ensure that they are made more flexible—in some ways, the House of Lords may provide instruction for us—with regard to the rights of all parties, especially those in opposition. We look forward to contributing constructively to such discussions at the earliest opportunity. In the meantime, we wish you well, Sir.

3.16 pm

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): Mr. Speaker-Elect, on my behalf and that of my colleagues, I offer sincere congratulations on your being re-elected as Speaker of this

place. We can vouch for your approachability, the care with which you have listened to the issues that Members have brought to you and the way in which you have responded to them. We look forward with confidence to that same care and consideration being offered in the months and years to come.

I congratulate the Father of the House on his conduct of today's proceedings. It is not necessary for me to emphasise the way in which he has built a reputation over the years as a Back Bencher who has held Governments of all colours to account. That reminds us that that is the prime function that many of us have in the House. I am sure, Mr. Speaker-Elect, that with your consideration for Back Benchers and for the primary role of the House, you will always be ready to assist us in ensuring that the Government are held to account.

It is commonplace these days to regret the decline of the standing of the House, but we would all do well to remember that its standing depends upon each and every one of us in the contribution that we make to the House. I am sure that we shall all be conscious of that responsibility. However, we rely upon you, Mr. Speaker-Elect, when it comes to issues where government may perhaps wish to cut corners or to do things elsewhere, to insist upon the primacy of the House.

I shall make a cautionary comment on the remarks of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), the leader of the Liberal Democrats. We want to see the procedures of the House become more effective and clearly and easily understood. However, virtually every time that the reform of our procedures is broached, the result is that the life of government is made easier. That is not our objective.

3.18 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): On behalf of the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru, I warmly congratulate you, Mr. Speaker-Elect, on your unanimous re-election as Speaker.

I congratulate also my old friend the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell). He represents a constituency of which I have some knowledge. I thought that I had seen everything in 10 successful, gruelling campaigns involving the hon. Gentleman since the 1960s. However, the election tactic of being injured in the service of the Linlithgow Rose football club is breathtaking. The hon. Gentleman has our profound congratulations on being the senior Member of this place.

I congratulate you, especially, Mr. Speaker-Elect, on your resounding victory in the Glasgow, Springburn constituency, despite the best efforts of my party. It was not the most nail-biting contest of the election evening. Given the size of your majority, I am sure that the secret weapon of being able to tell your constituents that you had something useful to do here stood you in excellent stead.

It took almost seven hours to elect you last October. I remarked then that the qualities that some people regarded as controversial were excellent reasons for your occupying the Chair. I am delighted that that view is now

held unanimously. In the past seven months, you have demonstrably kept your vow to protect all parts of the House.

People who listened to your remarks today will take heart from your declaration that you are the servant not of the Executive but of the Chamber. Those of us in the minority parties already have reason to be grateful for your fairness, impartiality and protection of minority rights in the House.

If you continue to do as you have done in the past seven months, you will occupy the Chair for many years, and you and your wife, Mary, will occupy the Speaker's House for many years.

3.20 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I congratulate you, Mr. Speaker-Elect, on your return to the Chair. I also warmly congratulate the Father of the House, whom I admire greatly. He has inspired me to keep on about a subject until the Executive takes action. Even if the Executive does not take action, at least everyone in the country knows what the subject is about.

You have a more difficult task, Mr. Speaker-Elect, because my party has enlarged itself. I am sure that you know that in the Bible, five is the number of grace. You will need grace to deal with the five Democratic Unionist Members; we are also the fifth largest party in the House. I am sure that you will ask for grace in your prayers, which you mentioned. I assure you that the good Lord will give you grace.

I served under your Chairmanship for a long time when you were Deputy Speaker. We have had some tilts, but you have been exceedingly fair, accessible and willing to listen. I admire you for that.

Matters in the country that I come from need much debate in the House. I trust that hon. Members will listen to the electors of Northern Ireland. The turnout in the general election was higher there than in any other part of the United Kingdom. Alas, hundreds of people in my constituency were not allowed to vote. Although they had queued for 45 minutes to an hour, they were not given access to the ballot box. That is a disgrace. We need access to the ballot box when an election is called.

Hon. Members do not want to hear some of the things that I say, but there will be plenty time to say and emphasise them. I am most happy to serve under your Chairmanship. The courtesy and fair play that you have given the point of view that I express will be sustained by your continued occupancy of the Chair.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. McAvoy.]

MR. SPEAKER-ELECT thereupon put the Question, which being agreed to, the House adjourned accordingly until tomorrow, and MR. SPEAKER-ELECT went away without the Mace before him.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-four minutes past Three o'clock.

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House of Commons

Thursday 14 June 2001

The House being met at half-past Two o'clock, and MR. SPEAKER having taken the Chair;

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners;

The House went; and, having returned—

Election of Speaker

Mr. Speaker: I have to report that this House has been in the House of Lords where Her Majesty, by Her Royal Commissioners, has been pleased to approve the choice made of myself for the Office of Speaker. I have, in your name and on your behalf, made claim by humble petition to Her Majesty to all your ancient and undoubted rights and privileges, particularly to freedom of speech in debate, freedom from arrest and freedom of access to Her Majesty whenever occasion shall require, and that the most favourable construction shall be put upon all proceedings. All these Her Majesty, by Her Commissioners, has been pleased to confirm in as ample a manner as they have ever been granted or confirmed by Herself or by any of Her Royal Predecessors.

My first duty to the House is to report my respectful acknowledgement and grateful thanks for the great honour you have conferred upon me in placing me in the Chair.

Members Sworn

Mr. Speaker: I must now call upon the Members of the House, according to the usual custom, to take the Oath of Allegiance at the Table of the House, first doing so myself.

Thereupon Mr. SPEAKER first, alone, standing upon the upper step of the Chair, took and subscribed the Oath.

Mr. Speaker: Before Members take the Oath or affirm, I remind the House of the ruling of my predecessor regarding the use of facilities by Members who have not taken their seats. The services of the Departments of the House, as specified by my predecessor, will not be available to Members who have not taken the Oath or affirmed before the date of the Queen's Speech, next Wednesday. The only exception will be Members who, before that date, have sent me a letter informing me that, for health or other good reasons, they cannot attend to take their seats immediately after the election but desire to do so at the earliest possible moment.

It may be for the convenience of the House if I indicate my intentions with regard to the taking of the Oath by right. hon. and hon. Members. I propose to call, first, the members of the Cabinet; then the shadow Cabinet; then all Privy Councillors not included in those two groups, wherever they may be sitting; and then other Ministers. Thereafter I shall call other hon. Members according to seniority determined on the basis of the Parliament of first entry or, for those with broken service, that of most recent entry.

The first batch will be those elected in or before the 1983 Parliament. Thereafter I shall proceed to call Members to take the Oath or affirm by successive Parliaments. I hope that, by late this afternoon, we will have made sufficient progress to enable all Members to swear in who wish to do so, up to and including those elected to the 1992 Parliament. The House will sit again tomorrow at 9.30, when I shall call Members first elected to the 1997 Parliament or to the current Parliament as well as Members elected to earlier Parliaments who were not able to take the Oath today.

Finally, the House will meet again next Tuesday at 2.30 to enable Members to take the Oath who were not able to do so this week.

Those arrangements are very similar to those adopted at the start of the previous Parliament in 1997, and they follow the recommendations of the Procedure Committee. I hope that this announcement will be helpful to Members in planning their programmes. Progress will depend, of course, on the number of Members wishing to take the Oath at any particular time. I advise Members to watch the annunciators to establish progress, and to speak to their Whips.

I also hope that Members will come forward in an orderly manner. I remind Members that the taking of the Oath, as a proceeding of the House, is recorded by the television cameras and that anything said by Members may appear on television or be picked up by microphones. Let us now begin.

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Right honourable Anthony Charles Lynton Blair, Sedgfield

Right honourable John Leslie Prescott, Kingston upon Hull East

Right honourable James Gordon Brown, Dunfermline East

Right honourable John Whitaker Straw, Blackburn

Right honourable David Blunkett, Sheffield, Brightside

Right honourable Margaret Mary Beckett, Derby South

Right honourable Clare Short, Birmingham, Ladywood

Right honourable Andrew David Smith, Oxford East

Right honourable Alan Milburn, Darlington

Right honourable Tessa Jane Jowell, Dulwich & West Norwood

Right honourable Helen Liddell, Airdrie & Shotts

Right honourable Geoffrey William Hoon, Ashfield

Right honourable Paul Peter Murphy, Torfaen

Right honourable Estelle Morris, Birmingham, Yardley

Right honourable Patricia Hope Hewitt, Leicester West

Charles Rodway Clarke, Norwich South

Right honourable John Reid, Hamilton North & Bellshill

Right honourable Hilary Jane Armstrong, North West Durham

Right honourable Francis Anthony Aylmer Maude, Horsham

Right honourable Ann Noreen Widdecombe, Maidstone & The Weald

Angela Frances Browning, Tiverton & Honiton

Right honourable Andrew James Mackay, Bracknell

David Lindsay Willetts, Havant

Andrew David Lansley, South Cambridgeshire

Edward Henry Garnier, Harborough

Gary Nicholas Streeter, South West Devon

Theresa Mary May, Maidenhead

Oliver Letwin, West Dorset

Archibald John Norman, Tunbridge Wells

Timothy Stephen Kenneth Yeo, South Suffolk

Peter Michael Ainsworth, East Surrey

Right honourable David Philip Heathcoat-Amory, Wells

Right honourable James Norwich Arbuthnot, North East Hampshire

Right honourable John Anderson Cunningham, Copeland

Right honourable Gerald Bernard Kaufman, Manchester, Gorton

Right honourable Ian McCartney, Makerfield

Right honourable Keith John Charles Bradley, Manchester, Withington

Right honourable Alun Edward Michael, Cardiff South & Penarth

Right honourable Paul Yaw Boateng, Brent South

Right honourable Adam Ingram, East Kilbride

Right honourable Charles Peter Kennedy, Ross, Skye & Inverness West

Right honourable David Trimble, Upper Bann

Right honourable Derek Foster, Bishop Auckland

Right honourable Frank Gordon Dobson, Holborn & St Pancras

Right honourable David Maurice Curry, Skipton & Ripon

Right honourable Joyce Gwendolen Quin, Gateshead East & Washington West

Right honourable Winifred Ann Taylor, Dewsbury

Right honourable Thomas Clarke, Coatbridge & Chryston

Right honourable Sir Brian Stanley Mawhinney, North West Cambridgeshire

Right honourable David John Maclean, Penrith & The Border

Right honourable Douglas Martin Hogg, Sleaford & North Hykeham

Right honourable Eric Forth, Bromley & Chislehurst

Right honourable David Michael Davis, Haltemprice & Howden

Right honourable John Michael Jack, Fylde

Right honourable John Alan Redwood, Wokingham

Right honourable Walter Menzies Campbell, North East Fife

Right honourable Sir Alan Gordon Barraclough, Haselhurst, Saffron Walden

Right honourable Kenneth Harry Clarke, Rushcliffe

Right honourable Terry Davis, Birmingham, Hodge Hill

Right honourable Michael Howard, Folkestone & Hythe

Right honourable Michael Andrew Ancram, Devizes

Right honourable Gregory Knight, East Yorkshire

Right honourable John Yorke Denham, Southampton, Itchen

Melanie Jane Johnson, Welwyn Hatfield

Beverley June Hughes, Stretford & Urmston

Robert William Ainsworth, Coventry North East

John Francis Spellar, Warley

George Foulkes, Carrick, Cumnock & Doon Valley

Graham Eric Stringer, Manchester, Blackley

Denis MacShane, Rotherham

Lynda Margaret Clark, Edinburgh Pentlands

Right honourable Frank Field, Birkenhead

The Reverend Ian Richard Kyle Paisley, North Antrim

The Reverend William Martin Smyth, Belfast South

James Donnelly Touhig, Islwyn

Dawn Primarolo, Bristol South

Douglas Alexander, Paisley South

Ruth Maria Kelly, Bolton West

Elliot Anthony Morley, Scunthorpe

Brian Wilson, Cunninghame North

Anne McGuire, Stirling

David Charles Jamieson, Plymouth, Devonport

Hazel Anne Blears, Salford
 Gerald Sutcliffe, Bradford South
 Right honourable Bruce Thomas George, Walsall South
 Benjamin Peter James Bradshaw, Exeter
 Desmond Henry Browne, Kilmarnock & Loudoun
 Jacqueline Jill Smith, Redditch
 Christopher Michael Leslie, Shipley
 Sally Curtis Keeble, Northampton North
 Rosalie Winterton, Doncaster Central
 Hilary James Benn, Leeds Central
 Keith Hill, Streatham
 Angela Evans Smith, Basildon
 Ivor Keith Caplin, Hove
 James Fitzpatrick, Poplar & Canning Town
 Anthony James McNulty, Harrow East
 David George Hanson, Delyn
 Thomas McLaughlin McAvoy, Glasgow Rutherglen
 Nicholas Richard Ainger, Carmarthen West & South Pembrokeshire
 Dan Norris, Wansdyke
 Kevin McNamara, Kingston upon Hull North
 David Julian Winnick, Walsall North
 David Marshall, Glasgow Shettleston
 Sir Patrick Thomas Cormack, South Staffordshire
 Martin John O'Neill, Ochil
 Marion Audrey Roe, Broxbourne
 Francis Cook, Stockton North
 William O'Brien, Normanton
 Peter David Robinson, Belfast East
 Margaret Eve Hodge, Barking
 Thomas Michael Cox, Tooting
 James Marshall, Leicester South
 Brian Charles John Sedgemore, Hackney South & Shoreditch
 John Arbuthnot Du Cane Wilkinson, Ruislip-Northwood
 John David McWilliam, Blaydon
 Roy Beggs, East Antrim
 Jane Ann Winterton, Congleton
 Sir Raymond Powell, Ogmire
 Mark Fisher, Stoke-on-Trent Central
 John McFall, Dumbarton
 Peter Kilfoyle, Liverpool, Walton
 Anthony Joseph Lloyd, Manchester Central
 Ann Clwyd, Cynon Valley
 Gwyneth Patricia Dunwoody, Crewe & Nantwich
 Catharine Letitia Hoey, Vauxhall
 Right honourable Peter Benjamin Mandelson, Hartlepool
 Angela Eagle, Wallasey
 Maria Eagle, Liverpool, Garston
 Terence Lewis, Worsley
 Robert Nelson Wareing, Liverpool, West Derby
 Winston James Griffiths, Bridgend

Roger James Gale, North Thanet
 Simon Robert, Key, Salisbury
 Sir Sydney Brooks Chapman, Chipping Barnet
 Peter James Bottomley, Worthing West
 John Mark Taylor, Solihull
 Edward Julian Egerton Leigh, Gainsborough
 Michael Nicholson Lord, Central Suffolk & North Ipswich
 Jonathan Sayeed, Mid Bedfordshire
 Antony Brian Baldry, Banbury
 David Anthony Atkinson, Bournemouth East
 Anne Campbell, Cambridge
 Glenda May Jackson, Hampstead & Highgate
 John Battle, Leeds West
 Simon Henry Ward Hughes, North Southwark & Bermondsey
 Kevin John Barron, Rother Valley
 Paul Philip Flynn, Newport West
 Archibald Johnstone Kirkwood, Roxburgh & Berwickshire
 David Martin Hinchliffe, Wakefield
 Alice Mahon, Halifax
 Diana Julie Abbott, Hackney North & Stoke Newington
 Harold Barnes, North East Derbyshire
 Ronald Campbell, Blyth Valley
 Gerald Neil Steinberg, City of Durham
 John Scott Cummings, Easington
 Ernest Ross, Dundee West
 Katherine Adams, Paisley North
 Terence Henry Rooney, Bradford North
 George William Stevenson, Stoke-on-Trent South
 Fraser Kemp, Houghton & Washington East
 Ian Phares Pearson, Dudley South
 John Heppell, Nottingham East
 Phillip James Woolas, Oldham East & Saddleworth
 Ivan Lewis, Bury South
 Sylvia Lloyd Heal, Halesowen & Rowley Regis
 Andrew Peter Miller, Ellesmere Port & Neston
 John Valentine Butterfill, Bournemouth West
 James Douglas Cran, Beverley & Holderness
 John Quentin Davies, Grantham & Stamford
 Alex Elliot Anderson Salmond, Banff & Buchan
 William James Clappison, Hertsmer
 John Matthew Patrick Hutton, Barrow & Furness
 Jean Ann Corston, Bristol East
 Gregory James Pope, Hyndburn
 Jon Owen Jones, Cardiff Central
 Dennis Turner, Wolverhampton South East
 Peter Landreth Atkinson, Hexham
 Oliver Heald, North East Hertfordshire
 Nicholas John Hawkins, Surrey Heath
 Nigel Martin Evans, Ribble Valley
 Elfyn Llwyd, Meirionnydd Nant Conwy

Alan John Simpson, Nottingham South
 George Edward Mudie, Leeds East
 Kevin Michael Hughes, Doncaster North
 Arthur Nicholas Winston Soames, Mid Sussex
 Bridget Prentice, Lewisham East
 Michael Thomas Hall, Weaver Vale
 Ian Stewart, Eccles
 John Derek Twigg, Halton
 Elizabeth Marion Blackman, Erewash
 Mark Wainwright Todd, South Derbyshire
 Colin Pickthall, West Lancashire
 Barry Strachan Gardiner, Brent North
 Dari Jean Taylor, Stockton South
 Caroline Louise Flint, Don Valley
 Linda Perham, Ilford North
 Anne Caroline Ballingall McIntosh, Vale of York
 John Simon Bercow, Buckingham
 Michael Thomas Hancock, Portsmouth South
 Graham Stuart Brady, Altrincham & Sale West
 Alexander John Randall, Uxbridge
 Janet Elizabeth Ann Dean, Burton
 David Neil Kidney, Stafford
 Desmond Stanley Turner, Brighton, Kempton
 John Rhodes Horam, Orpington
 Frank Doran, Aberdeen Central
 Joan Mary Ruddock, Lewisham, Deptford
 Kali Carol Jean Mountford, Colne Valley
 James Edward Thornton Paice, South East
 Cambridgeshire
 Cheryl Elise Kendall Gillan, Chesham & Amersham
 Timothy Eric Boswell, Daventry
 Richard Michael Bacon, South Norfolk
 Stephen John Ladyman, South Thanet
 William Ernest Rammell, Harlow
 Denis Murphy, Wansbeck
 Christine McCafferty, Calder Valley
 James Andrew Plaskitt, Warwick & Leamington
 Gareth Richard Thomas, Harrow West
 Gareth Thomas, Clwyd West
 Hugh Bayley, City of York
 Ross Frederick Cranston, Dudley North
 Constance Ann Cryer, Keighley
 Ian Colin Taylor, Esher & Walton
 Ian Gibson, Norwich North
 Rachel Anne Squire, Dunfermline West
 David John Stewart, Inverness East, Nairn & Lochaber
 William Tynan, Hamilton South
 Frank Roy, Motherwell & Wishaw
 Michael Connarty, Falkirk East
 Helen Margaret Jackson, Sheffield, Hillsborough
 Kerry Patrick Pollard, St Albans
 James Dolan Cunningham, Coventry South
 Barbara Maureen Roche, Hornsey & Wood Green

William John Olnier, Nuneaton
 Sir Paul Alexander Beresford, Mole Valley
 Brian David Jenkins, Tamworth
 James Keith Chapman, Wirral South
 John Flasby Lawrance Whittingdale, Maldon & East
 Chelmsford
 Adrian Edward Bailey, West Bromwich West
 John Robertson, Glasgow Anniesland
 Ivan John Henderson, Harwich
 Anthony Richard Clarke, Northampton South
 John Henry Hayes, South Holland & The Deepings
 Alan Arthur Hurst, Braintree
 Michael Clapham, Barnsley West & Penistone
 Kenneth Purchase, Wolverhampton North East
 Shona McIsaac, Cleethorpes
 Helen Mary Jones, Warrington North
 Ian Arthur Cawsey, Brigg & Goole
 Mike Wood, Batley & Spennings
 Jon Hedley Trickett, Hemsworth
 Brian Iddon, Bolton South East
 John Douglas Naysmith, Bristol North West
 Harold Best, Leeds North West
 Vernon Rodney Coaker, Gedling
 Lawrence William Quinn, Scarborough & Whitby
 Alan Campbell, Tynemouth
 Neil Turner, Wigan
 Nicholas Raymond Winterton, Macclesfield
 Rosemary McKenna, Cumbernauld & Kilsyth
 Patrick Hall, Bedford
 Richard John Grenville Spring, West Suffolk
 Alan Keen, Feltham & Heston
 Ann Lloyd Keen, Brentford & Isleworth
 Valerie Davey, Bristol West
 Charlotte Atkins, Staffordshire Moorlands
 John Cradock Maples, Stratford-on-Avon
 Huw William Edmund Edwards, Monmouth
 Martyn David Jones, Clwyd South
 Sydney Norman John Rapson, Portsmouth North
 John Eric Austin, Erith & Thamesmead
 Nigel David Jones, Cheltenham
 Andrew Mackinlay, Thurrock
 John Robert Cryer, Hornchurch
 Right honourable Harriet Harman, Camberwell &
 Peckham
 Andrew John Reed, Loughborough
 Jovanka Joan Humble, Blackpool North & Fleetwood
 Phyllis Margaret Starkey, Milton Keynes South West
 Michael O'Brien, North Warwickshire
 Andrew King, Rugby & Kenilworth
 Richard Geoffrey James Ottaway, Croydon South
 Malcolm Kemp Savidge, Aberdeen North
 Margaret Patricia Munn, Sheffield, Heeley
 Stephen Hepburn, Jarrow

Stephen James McCabe, Birmingham, Hall Green
 Christopher John Mullin, Sunderland South
 Calum Alistair Macdonald, Western Isles
 Donald Michael Ellison Foster, Bath
 Evan Leslie Harris, Oxford West & Abingdon
 David William St. John Heath, Somerton & Frome
 Andrew Henry George, St Ives
 Robert Laxton, Derby North
 David Leslie Taylor, North West Leicestershire
 Linda Gilroy, Plymouth, Sutton
 Gordon Prentice, Pendle
 Rudi Jan Vis, Finchley & Golders Green
 Yvette Cooper, Pontefract & Castleford
 Stephen Creswell Timms, East Ham
 Jim Murphy, Eastwood
 Stephen Rothwell O'Brien, Eddisbury
 David Digby Rendel, Newbury
 Nicolas John Gibb, Bognor Regis & Littlehampton
 Iris Robinson, Strangford
 Nigel Alexander Dodds, Belfast North
 Gregory Lloyd Campbell, East Londonderry
 William David Wiggin, Leominster
 Andrew Richard Rosindell, Romford
 David William Donald Cameron, Witney
 George Galloway, Glasgow Kelvin
 James Hood, Clydesdale
 Kevin Denis Brennan, Cardiff West
 Colin Robert Challen, Morley & Rothwell
 Marek Jerzy Lazarowicz, Edinburgh North & Leith
 Wayne David, Caerphilly
 Simon Patrick Tipping, Sherwood
 Christopher Stephen Grayling, Epsom & Ewell
 Laurence Anthony Robertson, Tewkesbury
 Jonathan Cruddas, Dagenham
 Jeffrey Mark Donaldson, Lagan Valley
 Jamie Charles Cann, Ipswich
 Ann McKechin, Glasgow Maryhill
 Anthony Wayland Wright, Cannock Chase
 Crispin Jeremy Rupert Blunt, Reigate
 Edward O'Hara, Knowsley South

Thomas Anthony Watson, West Bromwich East
 George Phillip Willis, Harrogate & Knaresborough
 Andrew Murray Burnham, Leigh
 James Mark Dakin Purnell, Stalybridge & Hyde
 David Wright, Telford
 Laura Jean Moffatt, Crawley
 Anne Picking, East Lothian
 David Wright Miliband, South Shields
 Derek Murray Wyatt, Sittingbourne & Sheppey
 Susan Kathleen Doughty, Guildford
 John Mann, Bassetlaw
 David Arthur Stephen Tredinnick, Bosworth
 Gillian Joanna Merron, Lincoln
 Kevan David Jones, North Durham
 Right honourable Richard George Caborn, Sheffield Central
 Alan James Carter Duncan, Rutland & Melton
 John Andrew Barrett, Edinburgh West
 Alexander Morrison Carmichael, Orkney & Shetland
 Sandra Julia Gidley, Romsey
 Alan Reid, Argyll & Bute
 John Archibald, Viscount Thurso, Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross
 David Hamilton, Midlothian
 David Hywel Francis, Aberavon
 Mark Phillip Hendrick, Preston
 Colin Edward Breed, South East Cornwall
 Vera Baird, Redcar
 Parmjit Singh Dhanda, Gloucester
 Helen Mary Southworth, Warrington South
 Andrew Love, Edmonton
 Paul David Stinchcombe, Wellingborough
 Janet Anderson, Rossendale & Darwen
 Sandra Osborne, Ayr
 James Patrick Dowd, Lewisham West
 Nicholas Barton Harvey, North Devon

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn until tomorrow at half-past Nine o'clock.—[Mr. Kemp.]
Adjourned accordingly at one minute past Five o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 15 June 2001

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER in the Chair]

Members Sworn

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Right honourable Robin Cook, Livingston
 Right honourable William Jefferson Hague, Richmond (Yorks)
 Jacqueline Anne Harkness Lait, Beckenham
 Nigel Christopher Waterson, Eastbourne
 Paul Stuart Keetch, Hereford
 Jennifer Louise Tonge, Richmond Park
 Jacqueline Rita Lawrence, Preseli Pembrokeshire
 David Elliott Drew, Stroud
 Andrew Hartley Dismore, Hendon
 Roger Leslie Berry, Kingswood
 Desmond Angus Swayne, New Forest West
 John Grogan, Selby
 Michael Fraser Weir, Angus
 Anthony David Wright, Great Yarmouth
 Lynne Mary Jones, Birmingham, Selly Oak
 John William MacDougall, Central Fife
 David Stuart Havard, Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney
 Siôn Llewelyn Simon, Birmingham, Erdington
 Anthony David Steen, Totnes
 Christopher Richard Pond, Gravesham
 Gregory Leonard George Barker, Bexhill & Battle
 Fiona Margaret Mactaggart, Slough
 John Charles Baron, Billericay
 Bernard Christison Jenkin, North Essex
 Candice Kathleen Atherton, Falmouth & Camborne
 Clive James Charles Betts, Sheffield, Attercliffe
 Roger Duncan Godsiff, Birmingham, Sparkbrook & Small Heath
 Helen Rosemary Brinton, Peterborough
 Richard Beecroft Allan, Sheffield, Hallam

Philip Hammond, Runnymede & Weybridge
 Mark Prisk, Hertford & Stortford
 Alexander Boris Johnson, Henley
 Mark Gino Francois, Rayleigh
 Andrew Edmund Armstrong Selous, South West Bedfordshire
 Hugo Swire, East Devon
 Howard Emerson Flight, Arundel & South Downs
 Khalid Mahmood, Birmingham, Perry Barr
 Eric Joyce, Falkirk West
 Douglas John Henderson, Newcastle upon Tyne North
 Paul Alexander Cyril Goodman, Wycombe
 Mark Jonathon Mortlock Simmonds, Boston & Skegness
 Brian Arthur Robert White, North East Milton Keynes
 Stephen Pelham Pound, Ealing North
 Thomas Anthony Brake, Carshalton & Wallington
 Oona Tamsyn King, Bethnal Green & Bow
 Stuart Bell, Middlesbrough
 Colin Burgon, Elmet
 Andrew Robert George Robathan, Blaby
 Sir Michael William Hardy Spicer, West Worcestershire
 Andrew Guy Tyrie, Chichester
 Gwynfor Mathews Prosser, Dover
 David Lepper, Brighton, Pavilion
 Clive Stafford Soley, Ealing, Acton & Shepherd's Bush
 Iain Coleman, Hammersmith & Fulham
 Mark Christopher Field, Cities of London & Westminster
 Neil Francis Gerrard, Walthamstow
 Martin Linton, Battersea
 Julie Kirkbride, Bromsgrove
 David Lindon Lammy, Tottenham
 Right honourable Christopher Robert Smith, Islington South & Finsbury
 Christopher Nigel Beard, Bexleyheath & Crayford
 David Wilshire, Spelthorne
 Henry Campbell Bellingham, North West Norfolk
 Paul Kenneth Burstow, Sutton & Cheam
 Geraldine Smith, Morecambe & Lunesdale
 David Laurie Ruffley, Bury St Edmunds

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn till Tuesday 19 June at half-past Two o'clock.—[Mr. Hill.]

Adjourned accordingly at thirteen minutes to Twelve o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 19 June 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Members Sworn

Mr. Speaker: Order. May I request that the most senior Members are taken first and that junior Members draw back? I see Sir Peter Tapsell; he is a very senior Member.

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Sir Peter Hannay Bailey Tapsell, Louth and Horncastle
 Right honourable Alistair Maclean Darling, Edinburgh Central
 Right honourable Michael Hugh Meacher, Oldham West and Royton
 Right honourable Wyvill Richard Nicolls Raynsford, Greenwich and Woolwich
 Lewis George Moonie, Kirkcaldy
 Peter Gerald Hain, Neath
 Jane Elizabeth Kennedy, Liverpool, Wavertree
 Stephen Twigg, Enfield, Southgate
 Alan Patrick Vincent Whitehead, Southampton, Test
 John Healey, Wentworth
 George Iain Duncan Smith, Chingford and Woodford Green
 Right honourable Alan James Beith, Berwick-upon-Tweed
 Joan Lorraine Walley, Stoke-on-Trent North
 Right honourable Michael Denzil Xavier Portillo, Kensington and Chelsea
 Right honourable Sir George Samuel Knatchbull Young, North West Hampshire
 Jimmy Wray, Glasgow Baillieston
 Eddie McGrady, South Down
 Bob Blizzard, Waveney
 Michael John Mates, East Hampshire
 David Gordon Clelland, Tyne Bridge
 Right honourable Peter Bruce Lilley, Hitchin and Harpenden
 Right honourable Gillian Patricia Shephard, South West Norfolk
 Malcolm Douglas Moss, North East Cambridgeshire
 Brian Harold Donohoe, Cunninghame South
 Harry Michael Cohen, Leyton and Wanstead
 Right honourable Donald Anderson, Swansea East
 Richard Charles Scrimgeour Shepherd, Aldridge-Brownhills
 Austin Vernon Mitchell, Great Grimsby
 Right honourable Sir John Paul Stanley, Tonbridge and Malling

David William George Chidgey, Eastleigh
 David Anthony Crausby, Bolton North East
 Malcolm Gray Bruce, Gordon
 Lindsay Harvey Hoyle, Chorley
 Eric Evelyn Illsley, Barnsley Central
 Llewellyn Thomas Smith, Blaenau Gwent
 Eric Jack Pickles, Brentwood and Ongar
 George Edward Howarth, Knowsley North and Sefton East
 Right honourable David John Denzil Davies, Llanelli
 Alan Arthur Johnson, Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle
 Richard Lewis Page, South West Hertfordshire
 William Nigel Paul Cash, Stone
 Timothy Paul Loughton, East Worthing and Shoreham
 John Robert Greenway, Ryedale
 Peter Leslie Pike, Burnley
 Richard Haines Burden, Birmingham, Northfield
 Julian William Hendy Brazier, Canterbury
 Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Cotswold
 Peter James Luff, Mid Worcestershire
 Paul Gerrard Goggins, Wythenshawe and Sale East
 Derek Leslie Conway, Old Bexley and Sidcup
 James Dobbin, Heywood and Middleton
 Diana Mary Organ, Forest of Dean
 Nicholas Douglas Palmer, Broxtowe
 Paul Anthony Truswell, Pudsey
 Paul Tyler, North Cornwall
 Mohammed Sarwar, Glasgow Govan
 Brian Joseph Cotter, Weston-Super-Mare
 James Sheridan, West Renfrewshire
 John Lyons, Strathkelvin and Bearsden
 Debra Ann Shipley, Stourbridge
 Robert Andrew Raymond Syms, Poole
 Christopher Paul Farrelly, Newcastle-under-Lyme
 Betty Helena Williams, Conwy
 Fabian Hamilton, Leeds North East
 William Anthony Worthington, Clydebank and Milngavie
 Howard Geoffrey Alvan Stoate, Dartford
 James Mackay Cousins, Newcastle upon Tyne Central
 Angela Eileen Watkinson, Upminster
 James Whiteside Gray, North Wiltshire
 Jonathan Simon Djangoly, Huntingdon
 Paul William Barry Marsden, Shrewsbury and Atcham
 Adrian John Flook, Taunton
 Karen Patricia Buck, Regent's Park and Kensington North
 Michael John Foster, Worcester
 Ashok Kumar, Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland
 Patrick John Mercer, Newark
 Andrew Murrison, Westbury
 Joan Marie Ryan, Enfield North
 Ian Richard Liddell-Grainger, Bridgwater
 Charles Hendry, Wealden
 Louise Ellman, Liverpool, Riverside

[Mr. Speaker]

Thomas Hilton Dawson, Lancaster and Wyre
 Margaret Moran, Luton South
 Iain Luke, Dundee East
 Timothy William George Collins, Westmorland and Lonsdale
 George Gideon Oliver Osborne, Tatton
 Martin Philip Caton, Gower
 David Stanley Borrow, South Ribble
 Tom Levitt, High Peak
 Tom Harris, Glasgow Cathcart
 Michael Cathel Fallon, Sevenoaks
 Shaun Anthony Woodward, St Helens South
 Ian Colin Lucas, Wrexham
 Jim Knight, South Dorset
 John Martin McDonnell, Hayes and Harlington
 Clive Stanley Efford, Eltham
 David Alan Heyes, Ashton under Lyne
 David Anthony Laws, Yeovil
 John David Pugh, Southport
 Peter John Duncan, Galloway and Upper Nithsdale
 Tony McWalter, Hemel Hempstead
 Julian Murray Lewis, New Forest East
 Anne Begg, Aberdeen South
 Annette Lesley Brooke, Mid Dorset and North Poole
 Patsy Calton, Cheadle
 Sylvia Hermon, North Down
 Mark Gerard Hoban, Fareham
 Robert John Walter, North Dorset
 Mark Richard Tami, Alyn and Deeside
 Paul Gordon Clark, Gillingham
 Philip Ian Hope, Corby
 Claire Ward, Watford
 Dominic Charles Robert Grieve, Beaconsfield
 Michael John Gapes, Ilford South
 Norman Peter Lamb, North Norfolk
 Stephen Hesford, Wirral West
 Nigel Griffiths, Edinburgh South
 Right honourable Alan Thomas Howarth, Newport East
 Simon Thomas, Ceredigion
 Hywel Williams, Caernarfon
 Adam Price, Carmarthen East and Dinefwr
 Gisela Gschaider Stuart, Birmingham, Edgbaston
 Michael David Wills, North Swindon
 Steven John Webb, Northavon
 Alistair James Hendrie Burt, North East Bedfordshire
 Damian Howard Green, Ashford
 Keith Robert Simpson, Mid Norfolk
 Julie Morgan, Cardiff North
 Albert Owen, Ynys Môn
 Angus Robertson, Moray
 Right honourable John Selwyn Gummer, Suffolk Coastal

Keith Vaz, Leicester East
 Robert Howard Marris, Wolverhampton South West
 Jane Patricia Griffiths, Reading East
 Philip Andrew Sawford, Kettering
 Eric Anthony Martlew, Carlisle
 Michael Jabez Foster, Hastings and Rye
 Kim Scott Howells, Pontypridd
 Simon Hugh McGuigan Burns, West Chelmsford
 David Roy Lidington, Aylesbury
 Russell Leslie Brown, Dumfries
 Ann Coffey, Stockport
 Jeremy Bernard Corbyn, Islington North
 Martin John Salter, Reading West
 Andrew Francis Bennett, Denton and Reddish
 Michael Louis David Fabricant, Lichfield
 Robert Edward Russell, Colchester
 David Wilson Boyd Burnside, South Antrim
 Andrew Robert Frederick Hunter, Basingstoke
 Siobhain Ann McDonagh, Mitcham and Morden
 John David Cairns, Greenock and Inverclyde
 Christopher Shaun Ruane, Vale of Clwyd
 Adrian Mark Sanders, Torbay
 Patrick Allen McLoughlin, West Derbyshire
 Ian Graham Davidson, Glasgow Pollok
 Geraint Richard Davies, Croydon Central
 Daphne Barbara Follett, Stevenage
 Malcolm Hunt Wicks, Croydon North
 Roger Mark Casale, Wimbledon
 Jeffrey Ennis, Barnsley East and Mexborough
 Robert Graham Marshall-Andrews, Medway
 Norman John Baker, Lewes
 Paul Robert Holmes, Chesterfield
 Richard Younger-Ross, Teignbridge
 Right honourable Stephen John Byers, North Tyneside
 Thomas Anthony Cunningham, Workington
 Liam Fox, Woodspring
 Andrew John Turner, Isle of Wight
 Peter Charles Stephen Bradley, The Wrekin
 Right honourable Nicholas Hugh Brown, Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend
 Graham William Allen, Nottingham North
 Kelvin Peter Hopkins, Luton North
 Hugh Robertson, Faversham and Mid Kent
 Anthony John Colman, Putney
 Richard Thomas Taylor, Wyre Forest
 Matthew Roger Green, Ludlow
 Julia Kate Drown, South Swindon
 Right honourable Virginia Hilda Brunette Maxwell Bottomley, South West Surrey
 Claire Curtis-Thomas, Crosby
 Geoffrey Robinson, Coventry North West
 Gordon Marsden, Blackpool South
 Marsha Singh, Bradford West

Sir Robert Smith, West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine
Michael Kevin Moore, Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale
John Patrick Burnett, Torridge and West Devon
Mark Oaten, Winchester
Jonathan Rowland Shaw, Chatham and Aylesford
Caroline Alice Spelman, Meriden
Christopher Robert Chope, Christchurch
Right honourable Stephen James Dorrell, Charnwood
Lembit Öpik, Montgomeryshire
Roger Hugh Williams, Brecon and Radnorshire
Edward Jonathon Davey, Kingston and Surbiton

Dennis Edward Skinner, Bolsover
David Anthony Andrew Amess, Southend West
Christopher John Bryant, Rhondda
Anthony Louis Banks, West Ham
Andrew Stunell, Hazel Grove
Barry Sheerman, Huddersfield
Peter Wishart, North Tayside

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn till tomorrow at twenty-five minutes past Eleven o'clock.—
[*Mr. Sutcliffe.*]

Adjourned accordingly at Five o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 20 June 2001

The House met at twenty-five minutes past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER in the Chair]

Message to attend her Majesty:

The House went; and having returned:

The sitting was suspended until fifteen minutes past Two o'clock, and then resumed.

Members Sworn

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by Law:

Judy Mallaber, Amber Valley

Lorna Fitzsimons, Rochdale

Humfrey Jonathan Malins, Woking

Owen William Paterson, North Shropshire

Michael St John Trend, Windsor

Sir Edward MacMillan Taylor, Rochford and Southend East

John Hume, Foyle

Piara Singh Khobra, Ealing Southall

Right honourable Gavin Steel Strang, Edinburgh East and Musselburgh

Seamus Mallon, Newry and Armagh

James Gerald Douglas Howarth, Aldershot

Andrew John Bower Mitchell, Sutton Coldfield

Peter John Viggers, Gosport

Robert Michael Spink, Castle Point

David Michael Chaytor, Bury North

Right honourable Alan John Williams, Swansea West

Matthew Owen John Taylor, Truro and St Austell

John Vincent Cable, Twickenham

Joseph Edward Benton, Bootle

Christine Margaret Russell, City of Chester

Annabelle Ewing, Perth

2.25 pm

Sitting suspended.

2.30 pm

On resuming—

SESSIONAL ORDERS

ELECTIONS

Ordered,

That all Members who are returned for two or more places in any part of the United Kingdom do make their Election for which of the places they will serve, within one week after it shall appear that there is no question upon the Return for that place; and if any thing shall come in question touching the Return or Election of any Member, he is to withdraw during the time the matter is in debate; and that all Members returned upon double Returns do withdraw till their Returns are determined.

Resolved,

That if it shall appear that any person has been elected or returned a Member of this House, or endeavoured so to be by bribery, or any other corrupt practices, this House will proceed with the utmost severity against all such persons as shall have been wilfully concerned in such bribery or other corrupt practices.

WITNESSES

Resolved,

That if it shall appear that any person has been tampering with any Witness, in respect of his evidence to be given to this House, or any Committee thereof, or directly or indirectly has endeavoured to deter or hinder any person from appearing or giving evidence, the same is declared to be a high crime and misdemeanour, and this House will proceed with the utmost severity against such offender.

Resolved,

That if it shall appear that any person has given false evidence in any case before this House, or any Committee thereof, this House will proceed with the utmost severity against such offender.

METROPOLITAN POLICE

Ordered,

That the Commissioner of the Police of the Metropolis do take care that during the Session of Parliament the passages through the streets leading to this House be kept free and open and that no obstruction be permitted to hinder the passage of Members to and from this House, and that no disorder be allowed in Westminster Hall, or in the passages leading to this House, during the Sitting of Parliament, and that there be no annoyance therein or thereabouts, and that the Serjeant at Arms attending this House do communicate this Order to the Commissioner aforesaid.

VOTES AND PROCEEDINGS

Ordered,

That the Votes and Proceedings of this House be printed, being first perused by the Speaker.

OUTLAWRIES

A Bill for the more effectual preventing Clandestine Outlawries was read the first time, and ordered to be read a second time.

CHAIRMAN AND DEPUTY CHAIRMEN OF WAYS AND MEANS

Ordered,

That Sir Alan Haselhurst be Chairman of Ways and Means, and that Mrs. Sylvia Heal and Sir Michael Lord be First and Second Deputy Chairmen of Ways and Means.—[*Mr. Robin Cook.*]

Queen's Speech

Mr. Speaker: I have to acquaint the House that this House has this day attended Her Majesty in the House of Peers, and that Her Majesty was pleased to make a Most Gracious Speech from the Throne to both Houses of Parliament, of which I have, for greater accuracy, obtained a copy.

I shall direct that the terms of the Gracious Speech be printed in the appropriate place in the Votes and Proceedings. Copies are available in the Vote Office.

The Gracious Speech was as follows:

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

My Government's central objectives are economic stability, and investment and reform in public services, leading to a more prosperous and inclusive society.

To this end, my Government will continue to secure low inflation and sound public finances.

My Government's main priorities for the forthcoming Session will be reform in education, health, crime and welfare.

My Government will introduce legislation to reform education. An Education Bill will be introduced to promote diversity and higher standards, particularly in secondary schools. It will provide new opportunities for school sponsorship, more options for tackling failing schools, and greater freedom for successful headteachers and governors.

My Government will introduce legislation to reform health services. A Bill will decentralise power and direct resources to National Health Service staff, give patients greater influence on the running of the NHS, and strengthen regulation of the health professions.

Legislation will be drafted to reform the provision of health services in Wales.

Legislation will be brought forward to reform sentencing and rules of evidence, with measures to tackle corruption and sex offenders.

A Bill will be introduced to increase powers against money laundering, establish a Criminal Assets Recovery Agency, and make it easier to recover the proceeds of crime and drugs.

Legislation will be brought forward to help the police fight crime, ensure that they can co-operate effectively across police force boundaries and establish a new complaints system.

Legislation to reform the criminal courts system will be drafted in the light of the forthcoming recommendations from the review by Lord Justice Auld.

Legislation will be introduced to extend the life of the Football (Disorder) Act.

My Government will introduce legislation to reform the welfare system. A Bill will include measures to help more people back into work. Legislation will also be brought forward to introduce the new tax credits system, and to establish the new pension credit for pensioners.

My Government will introduce legislation to encourage enterprise, strengthen competition laws, and promote safeguards for consumers.

A draft Bill to create a single regulator for the media and communications industries and reform the broadcasting and telecommunications regulations will be published.

Members of the House of Commons

Estimates for the Public Service will be laid before you.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

In Northern Ireland, my Government will continue to work closely with the political parties and the Irish Government to secure the full implementation of the Belfast Agreement.

My Government maintains its commitment to devolution in Scotland and Wales.

Following consultation, my Government will introduce legislation to implement the second phase of House of Lords reform.

My Government will prepare legislation to allow political parties to make positive moves to increase the representation of women in public life.

My Government will publish draft legislation to take forward the recommendations of Lord Cullen's inquiry into rail safety.

Legislation will be introduced to reform the system of land registration to promote greater electronic conveyancing. The Bill to reform the purchase of freeholds by leaseholders and to create commonhold, a new form of tenure for flat owners, will be reintroduced.

My Government will introduce legislation to make the age entitlement for concessionary travel fares the same for men and women at the age of sixty.

A Bill will be introduced to reform adoption law to make children's interests paramount, and tackle inter-country adoption.

My Government will enable a free vote to take place on the future of hunting with dogs.

Other measures will be laid before you.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

The Duke of Edinburgh and I were delighted to pay a State Visit to Norway at the end of May. Similarly, we were pleased to receive the State Visit of His Excellency the President of South Africa and Mrs. Mbeki last week.

The Duke of Edinburgh and I look forward to attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Australia and subsequently visiting New Zealand in October. We also look forward to receiving a State Visit by the King and Queen of Jordan this autumn.

My Government will work with our partners to make sure that Europe has the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world. It will work for rapid progress on the enlargement of the European Union and will introduce legislation to enable the United Kingdom to ratify the Treaty of Nice and implement the Berlin Own Resources decision on the Union's future funding.

NATO will remain the cornerstone of Britain's national security, and my Government will work for a still more effective Alliance defence. In this context, and to enable the European Union to act where NATO chooses not to do so, my Government will work to improve the European Union's capacity, and Member States' capabilities, for humanitarian, peace-keeping and crisis management tasks.

Legislation will be introduced to improve the transparency of export controls and to establish their purpose.

Tackling climate change and making a reality of sustainable development will be a priority for my Government. It will fulfil the United Kingdom's international obligations arising from the Kyoto Protocol.

My Government will work for an early and comprehensive World Trade Round, which will benefit industrialised and developing countries alike.

In the United Nations, my Government will support a more modern and representative Security Council, and work to make conflict prevention and peacekeeping more effective.

My Government will work to encourage universal observance of human rights, including throughout the Commonwealth.

My Government will continue to work for a more effective global effort to reduce poverty, and will reintroduce its Bill to entrench and strengthen the poverty focus to development work.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels.

Debate on the Address

[FIRST DAY]

Mr. Speaker: Before I call the mover and seconder of the humble Address, I should announce to the House the proposed subjects for debate on subsequent days, which will be as follows:

Thursday 21 June—public services; Friday 22 June—foreign affairs and defence; Monday 25 June—economy, trade and industry; Tuesday 26 June—rural communities and transport; Wednesday 27 June—home affairs and constitution.

I call Mr. Barry Sheerman to move the humble Address, after which I shall call Mr. David Lammy to second it.

2.36 pm

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): I beg to move, That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows: Most Gracious Sovereign.

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be asked to move the motion today. When the Chief Whip first contacted to me, I was a little surprised, and I reacted with a proper degree of caution. As comrades and colleagues know—[*Interruption.*] That is a continuing joke, to which I shall return. As I was saying, I chair the cross-party group on preparations for the euro, which the Conservatives have never joined, so I subjected the invitation to five rigorous tests, and then decided that the time was right to move the motion.

I am especially relieved to see my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in his rightful place, after various unconfirmed news stories during the recent election campaign. We all heard that shadow Ministers and Ministers seemed to be missing or very elusive, but I can report that although the Prime Minister spent a great deal of time in my area, he eluded me in my constituency, Huddersfield. That was rather a blessing, because if I had suddenly seen the battle bus at the end of my road I would have wondered what was happening to my majority.

There were many rumours and a great deal of speculation about close sightings of the Prime Minister, and someone resembling him was seen apparently enjoying fish and chips at the Happy Haddock—or was it the Contented Plaiice?—in Brighouse in nearby Calder Valley. The Prime Minister was also rumoured to have downed half a pint of something alcoholic in Lindley in neighbouring Colne Valley. That was an unconfirmed rumour, but there was a pretty substantial report of a close encounter with the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner* photographer in either Shipley or Keighley.

In Huddersfield, however, there was no sign of the Prime Minister. My constituents were vigilant, as always, but wherever my right hon. Friend was, he could not be spotted in my patch. If we had tracked him down, he would have been very welcome. He has been a regular visitor to the town. On the most recent occasion, he came to unveil the statue to Harold Wilson, the only other Labour Prime Minister to win two consecutive victories.

If we had tracked the Prime Minister down, this time we would have wanted to show him a little of Huddersfield. We would have liked to take him to the McAlpine stadium, where Huddersfield Town plays—a team denied its rightful place in the premiership by a wicked international conspiracy. Within two years, we hope to be in the premier league. If the Prime Minister had been feeling a little generous, we could have fitted him up with some fine worsted suits, as Huddersfield is still a great textile, chemical and engineering manufacturing and exporting town.

We would also like to have shown the Prime Minister the dynamic new enterprises and to have introduced him to some of the people behind them, many of whom came to this country not so long ago with nothing but their raw talent and ambition. They are making their way and are progressing and prospering in a harmonious town, where all people live peacefully together.

My right hon. Friend would have been particularly impressed by our biggest wealth creator and employer. What is that? It is not a great chemical company or textile empire but the university of Huddersfield, which dominates the town with its 2,500 staff and 17,000 students and its outstanding academic achievements.

To be fair, we would have told the Prime Minister about some of our problems, worries and concerns. We are a prosperous town, but we have had our share of deprivation and under-resourced public services. Although we have seen much improvement in the past four years, my constituents are impatient for the next delivery phase that is promised in today's Queen's Speech. That will start to make a dramatic difference in health, education and transport and in services for the elderly, the disabled and those who are in need of special assistance.

Huddersfield folk have a reputation for being fair minded and generous, so they give credit where credit is due. We are delighted with the progress that has already been made, not only in health and education but in properly training people and getting them back into work with a guaranteed minimum wage.

Huddersfield is a superb town and it is a lovely town to represent here in Westminster. They say that the art of politics is a mixture of good timing, excellent judgment and a fair measure of luck: those of my generation who came here in 1979 obviously had a wonderful combination of all three! Although my timing was a little unfortunate, my choice of constituency was not. There is no better place in the land to represent. It is set in one of the most beautiful valleys of Yorkshire and is populated by the most industrious and resourceful people in the world. It is a town with a brilliant future and a rich past.

People who have managed to find their way to this paragon among towns have sometimes been rather frightened by the experience. The famous Methodist, John Wesley, wrote after riding through the town in 1757:

"A wilder people I never saw in England, the men, the women and children filled the street and appeared just ready to devour us." Fortunately, I never encountered any of that type of person during my recent election campaign. Had I done so, I would immediately have turned to the Deputy Prime Minister—a fellow Yorkshire Member of Parliament—for some protection.

I wonder how the new Home Secretary, even with the Deputy Prime Minister's assistance, would have dealt with Ned Ludd and his luddite followers. More-educated

Members will know that the luddites came from Huddersfield. Sometimes, as the Member representing the constituency, I resent the rather loose use of the term "luddite" in this Chamber. The fact of the matter is that Ned Ludd and his supporters roamed the country, for some reason dressed as women as a disguise, destroying mills and manufacturing plant and machinery. It was an attempt to hold back the progress of industrialisation that threatened their lives and livelihoods. It was partly as a result of such wide-scale protest in the 19th century that an enlightened system of universal franchise was created.

Elections are, of course, a thing that we professional politicians all love but also hate. How many of us share that awful dread of going out on a cold, miserable evening, with the sleet falling and the wind blowing—this is, after all, in June—to lead a canvassing team in a particularly unresponsive part of the constituency? On the way there it feels like the last thing in the world that one has ever wanted to do, but with the first knock on the door and the first encounter, when someone says, "Eh, lad, you must be joking. I wouldn't vote for you and your lot if hell froze over", the adrenalin starts to flow and the excitement returns.

Something happens in the heart of the true politician during the next few hours of meeting people whom one wants to represent. Those are the best of all times, and I am sure that I speak for many Members when I express that emotion. The patter and the repartee flow and only on a rare occasion is one left speechless on a doorstep.

In the recent election—this is a true story—I knocked on the door of a rather fine house. A lovely Huddersfield woman explained that she wanted to vote Labour very badly, but she had severe reservations about the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I pressed her about the matter. I said, "What is the problem? Is it his management of the economy?" She said, "No, I am happy with that." I said, "Is it his stance on the euro?" "No, I am happy with that," she said. "Is it the fact that he is a Scot?" I said rather nervously. She said, "No, I can just about cope with that." So I asked why she could not vote for us, and she answered, "I cannot bring myself to vote for a man who bought his wife cheap champagne." [Laughter.]

If I may continue the champagne theme, I have always believed, like my old friend John Smith, that politics must be fun at the same time as being deeply serious—a belief that he brought to politics and to this Chamber. I loved the fact that when John was interviewed on "Desert Island Discs" when he was shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, the luxury that he chose without hesitation was an inexhaustible case of champagne. Similarly, I remember that when I was first a councillor on a brand new council and we were looking for a motto we decided—this may sound a little old fashioned now—after much deliberation that we should go with "Nothing but the best is good enough for the workers."

Labour Members should remember that we are able to move this Queen's Speech motion today because of the dedication and determined struggle of a host not only of our party leaders past and present but of party workers who have striven and will continue to strive to ensure that nothing but the very best is good enough for the people of our country.

To be a politician is such a privilege; to be a parliamentarian is a great calling. There is a great joy in politics that many of us do not share openly enough.

I know that there are many books about the joys of other things, but the joy of politics is one that perhaps my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) should start to write. There is a lot of joy in politics and we do not celebrate it; there is also a lot of pain. Looking at this Queen's Speech, I can see a great deal of pleasure for my constituents.

As Chairman of the Select Committee on Education and Employment for the past two years, I find the strong emphasis on education in the Queen's Speech particularly welcome. More generally, its commitment to delivering significant improvements across the range of public services should be applauded, and I commend it to the House.

I shall finish on a very serious note. I hope that in this Parliament we will have the opportunity seriously to address two other issues. They are not general issues but House issues. I hope that we shall have the time and the patience to take seriously a discussion of what a modern representative Parliament should be like in the 21st century and our changing role as parliamentarians in that 21st century Parliament. In my two years as Chairman of the Select Committee, that is something on which a lead has been given and on which we have to spend time as a House. There are no easy and quick solutions, but if we do not examine the future of our House and our Parliament in the 21st century we shall be neglecting our jobs as politicians. We neglect both of those at our peril, and we owe it to ourselves and to the future of parliamentary democracy and our constituents to meet that challenge.

I am delighted with the massive majority that the country gave to our party, but we should all worry about the decline in turnout and apply our minds to it. I say to the Prime Minister and to the Government, in the most helpful spirit, that just as there is no conflict between a strong, well-managed economy and an excellent set of public services—I strongly applaud everything that we said on the stump and on television about that balance—there is also no reason for not having a good, vigorous, re-energised Parliament that holds the Executive to account but at the same time allows the Government to deliver on their vision and on their manifesto commitments.

I have kept the House too long—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I gave hon. Members that one. The measures contained in the Gracious Speech will be fiercely debated—and rightly—in coming days. It is lovely to see the Chamber full for a change. However, the fact of the matter is that this is the speech of a Government who are determined to quicken the pace of the radical changes that this country has long needed to make it a prosperous, peaceful and inclusive place to live. I commend the speech wholeheartedly to the House—comrades and colleagues together.

2.51 pm

Mr. David Lammy (Tottenham): It is a great privilege to second the motion on the Loyal Address. I stand here today with a sense of humility, knowing that the honour really belongs to the people of Tottenham, who invested their trust in me for a second time.

I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), who has distinguished himself over many years in the House. It is not without a degree of trepidation, however, that I join him in commending the Gracious Speech.

[Mr. David Lammy]

It is wonderful to be no longer the new boy in the House. In today's edition of *The Guardian*, the former Member for Gloucester refers to this place as something of a public school. I did not go to public school, but I was reminded of school when I was summoned by the Chief Whip yesterday. I felt more than a bit concerned and anxious about why I had to visit her office. What had I done during the past few days?

The feeling of anxiety took me back to the time I moved from infant school to junior school. I was quite a boisterous seven-year-old, and quickly found myself in a fracas with another child. Miss Vaisey, my headmistress, commanded me to go to her office. I remember that long, nervous walk, because I had been told by some of the older boys of the slipper in her office that she often had occasion to use. She told me to take my coat off, and said that she would be back in 10 minutes. Nervous and very scared, I thought that she said, "Take your clothes off"—[Laughter.] To this day, I recall with horror both our faces.

Imagine my great relief when I found out that the Chief Whip had summoned me to ask me to second the motion today. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield, who proposed the motion, joined the Labour party when the late Harold Wilson became its leader in 1963, and my hon. Friend has the honour of representing the former Prime Minister's home town as his constituency. Mr. Wilson's famous remark that a week is a long time in politics evidently made a deep impression on my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip, who in her wisdom realised that 24 hours was quite long enough for me to prepare for the speech of my life.

It was clear, however, that strict rules governed the tradition of making this speech. Back in the far distant days of May 1997, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) spoke of his pleasure at hearing senior Conservatives on the "Today" programme declare that they would listen to the country, learn from their mistakes and change their policies to make their party more electable again. I am delighted to continue that tradition, and report that I have heard that very same debate just this week. Those days in 1997 were a time when some wondered whether the career of the former Conservative Member for Enfield, Southgate was over: now we know that it is.

It is almost a year and a day since I was elected Member of Parliament for Tottenham. To represent the area where I was born and brought up, and where I now live, is truly a great privilege. It is impossible for me to talk about Tottenham without paying tribute to its most prominent advocate, Bernie Grant. Bernie's understanding of the realities and needs of his constituents earned him the enduring respect of so many people in Tottenham, and it was his determined pursuit of justice and equality for the under-represented that made him a national and international leader for those who needed a voice. I am committed to continuing that pursuit, and I wholeheartedly welcome the legislation to allow increases in the representation of women in public life. I know that that development alone will speed up the modernisation process in this place, and I know that many other younger voters will be grateful for that.

I hope, too, that the House will join me in working to achieve concrete results in increasing ethnic minority representation in this place and in public life. I am never anonymous in the Palace of Westminster, but I look forward to a day when women and black people will not stand out on these Benches and the House will truly be a House of representatives.

The emphasis on delivery rightly dominated the Gracious Speech. Yes, many of my constituents understand that business confidence, interest rates, tax levels and the economy are an important part of the national picture, but they will not say, "A job well done" until they see excellence in all our schools, the national health service transformed, safer streets and an efficient transport system.

It does not matter whether one is in Tottenham, parts of Glasgow, Toxteth, Moss Side, Oldham or Leeds; we are at a turning point in this country, and our constituents ask the same things of their representatives. Are we to become a ghetto or a gateway? Are we to become isolated or integrated? Are we to become an area of fragmented communities or a successful community of communities? It is the latter of these alternative possible futures that the Labour Government can deliver for my constituents.

In Tottenham we have witnessed significant improvements in our primary schools, with seven failing schools coming out of special measures, but the challenge of improving our secondary schools still lies ahead. I hope that the education Bill will continue to move us in the right direction, treading that difficult tightrope between support and intervention in turning schools and local education authorities around.

For me, education was the gateway to opportunity. I went to a primary school in Tottenham, as I have said. It had the unfortunate name of Downhills, but it was teachers at that school and later schools who pushed me uphill, improving my prospects and self-belief. I value those teachers because, academically, I never found things particularly easy. Right through school, I was in the second to bottom teaching set, and my mock exams predicted just two GCSEs.

My mother dug out my old school report recently, and my year 11 report says:

"Your son is a model pupil. Unfortunately, he's not a working model."—[Laughter]—

"If he gets his head down, he might get back into the sixth form."

I would not have the self-assurance to speak in the House of Commons were it not for those teachers and adults who invested in me as a child.

Hon. Members have heard me describe my constituency as the most multi-ethnic in Europe. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), who is now the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, and I represent constituencies in which 160 languages are spoken—a most diverse corner of the busiest capital in the world—so Members on both sides of the House will be surprised to hear of my recent conversion to Euroscepticism. Yes, I have decided that I must declare myself very much against the free movement of goods and people across Europe if the reports that Sol Campbell is to move from Spurs to Barcelona are true.

May I seek your indulgence for a few more moments, Mr. Speaker? I was in a surgery the other day, when an old Jamaican lady came up to me and told me a story

about travelling on a train in Jamaica. The train was moving rather slowly, and an American passenger became increasingly agitated. He stormed down the aisle of the train and asked the driver, "Can't you go any faster?" The driver replied, "I can go faster, but I've got to stay with the train." [Laughter.] This House has not always appeared to be at pace with the people outside, but I stay with this House, because it is the only vehicle for delivering change in our country. Under this Government, a second term offers the only opportunity for thousands of British children and for transforming public services. I commend the Gracious Speech to the House.

3.3 pm

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): It is the custom of the House for the Leader of the Opposition to congratulate the proposer and seconder of the Loyal Address on their speeches and to comment on them, and it is a great pleasure to do so this afternoon. I should like to begin by sincerely congratulating the hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) on his entertaining, enlightening and charming speech. I have a lot in common with him—I did not go to public school either. At the beginning of his speech, he referred to reading *The Guardian*. I do not know whether he knows that, next to the words "sitting MP", the pre-election profile of his constituency, supplied very authoritatively by *The Guardian*, stated:

"David Lammy, 2001 election: Not Standing."

I hope that he will join me in my resolve in saying, "*The Guardian* 2001: Not Reading."

The hon. Gentleman and I have other things in common. We were both elected to the House at by-elections, and at the time of our elections we were the youngest Members sitting on the Government Benches—so he had better be careful; strange things can happen to him. I shall give him some advice. Following his victory in the Tottenham by-election, he was quoted as saying that the Prime Minister tried to speak to him to congratulate him, but he had been too busy to return the Prime Minister's call. He had been elected for only a matter of minutes and was already behaving like the Chancellor. That is not a good idea. Given that we enjoyed his speech and that he started out as a chorister at Peterborough cathedral, I hope, as he speaks so well and straightforwardly, that he will not merely sing other people's tunes in the coming years.

It is also a pleasure to congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman). He is the author of a book, a fact that is not widely known. It is quite substantial. Indeed, I was torn between his speech and his book. He is co-author of a biography of Harold Laski. No doubt he will be flattered to know that I went to the Library last night and took out the book. However, he will not be too flattered to know that according to the inside cover, I am the first Member in eight and half years to do that. I got well advanced into it last night and reached the end of the acknowledgements, where it says:

"The original idea for this book was Barry Sheerman's in 1986... By 1991 most of the burden fell to the co-author and it was also he who wrote the manuscript. We see it in the general sense as jointly authored".

He wrote the book in the sense that Her Majesty wrote the Queen's Speech.

I shall be a bit nicer about the hon. Gentleman now. He has many other achievements to his name, one of which was to windsurf from Majorca to France. However,

he sailed closest to the wind when he urged restrictions on drinking in the Palace of Westminster. His career never really recovered from that. He also said other things that he might regret. In 1999, he said that the

"Opposition has lost the battle to discredit the dome, it is on track to being a huge success".

The hon. Gentleman referred to Huddersfield Town. I know that he will be deeply distressed—as we are in Yorkshire—at the current performance of the Huddersfield Giants rugby league team, especially as they have the longest run of defeats in English rugby league, including all of the first 14 games this season. Will he tell the players from me that I know how they feel?

The hon. Gentleman proved even more far sighted than in his other predictions by keeping his seat. Despite the huge majority that he mentioned, the House will be surprised to hear that in one way he held on only by the skin of his teeth. As the *New Statesman* reported in May this year:

"Stranger's Bar gossip identifies Huddersfield as the next likely target for Shaun and his butler".

May we congratulate the hon. Gentleman on resisting all the considerable temptations that were no doubt placed in his way?

It is a delight to congratulate both hon. Members on their speeches, all the more so because they have refused to use the script set out in the wonderful "New Labour, new Britain" briefing on the Queen's Speech for Labour Members that was so helpfully faxed to my office earlier today. It has an extremely useful model speech insert for hon. Members to use. We all look forward to seeing who makes that speech. I am happy to place a copy of it in the Library for my hon. Friends to judge speeches as the debate progresses in the next week. The speech does, however, require hon. Members to insert the right name of their constituency—so look out for that pitfall. It also refers to

"Real improvements to our schools in ANYPLACE. Real improvements to our hospitals in ANYPLACE... Here in ANYPLACE... unemployment is going down by XXXXXX".

Finally, it says:

"Our ambitions for ANYPLACE."

That could have been the briefing for the Queen's Speech or the selection speech of the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Woodward) as he went around the country. There may have been a mistake.

Obviously, there are measures in the Queen's Speech that we welcome, such as those to reform our adoption laws. We welcome the commitment to give legislative backing to the conclusions on rail safety that Lord Cullen is likely to reach in the second part of his report. It is time to learn the lessons of the Paddington rail crash and to make travelling by rail as safe as travelling by any other form of transport. We support an early, comprehensive world trade round, which was mentioned in the Queen's Speech. We strongly back the commitment to the observance of human rights, including throughout the Commonwealth, which we hope will lead to stronger action to put pressure on the Government of Zimbabwe.

We would have given a general welcome to other measures that are not in the Queen's Speech had they been included. Only this morning, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), sacked as a Minister after the election, accused the Government of breaking their

[Mr. William Hague]

promise to every pub-goer in the country—a group with whom I am happy to declare a joint interest. It is no wonder that young people are so disillusioned when at 10 pm on the Saturday before the election, they receive a text message on their mobile phones, saying,

"CLDNT GVE A xxxx 4 LST ORDRS? VTE LBR ON THRSDAY 4 XTRA TIME".

only to discover a week on Wednesday that the Bill is not included in the Queen's Speech.

Of course, there are other aspects of the Queen's Speech that Conservative Members and, I hope, Members of other parties can support. We welcome especially the commitment to build on the progress made by successive Governments in Northern Ireland. We continue to believe that the Belfast agreement offers the best hope for a peaceful, secure and stable Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, and we wish the current negotiations well. However, as the elections have shown, among mainstream moderate Unionists confidence in the agreement is in dangerously short supply.

The terrorists have been released; their political allies are now in government; the RUC has undergone painful change; yet not a single gun or ounce of Semtex has been given up. If the agreement is to realise the hopes that so many of us throughout the House have invested in it, it must be implemented in full and by all sides. I believe that the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and his party have been stretched as far as they can go, and it is now up to others to deliver. Unless that process begins shortly, we will face another serious crisis and the Government will face the first major test of their second term. I wish them well in dealing with it.

More generally, the Prime Minister always regarded winning a second term as the most important goal of his first term, and it would be churlish of me if I did not now congratulate him on achieving his prized objective. He has taken the opportunity to carry out a large reorganisation of the Government, including Ministers who days earlier were said to be doing a fantastic job. I, too, have been doing a bit of reorganising. In fact, since I announced my resignation even the Prime Minister has been nice about me. The experience of resigning has been so pleasant that I am thinking of recommending it more widely. The trouble is that for members of the Government, praise comes immediately before they leave their job, rather than immediately afterwards as in my case.

When we said that the former Foreign Secretary was not doing his job properly, the Prime Minister said that he had every confidence in him and that he

"is one of the most respected foreign ministers Britain has had for years and years and years".

When we called for the former Minister for Europe to be sacked, the Prime Minister said that

"it would have been grossly unjust to have dismissed him",

while his official spokesman said that he had

"the full support of the Prime Minister—end of story".

So when the Deputy Prime Minister hears the Prime Minister describe him as "loyal, true and decent", he ought to regard it as a deeply worrying development.

The Deputy Prime Minister has now been promoted to what was the first rung on the ministerial ladder occupied by his very close friend the right hon. Member for

Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson). After three failed attempts to appoint a Cabinet enforcer, the Government finally settled on a Cabinet bouncer. However, we congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister on the fact that whatever the Prime Minister does to him, he will always be one of the Cabinet's big hitters.

The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State (Mr. John Prescott) rose—

Mr. Hague: Steady. I do judo you know!

It has been a time for dishing out rewards and settling scores, but the Prime Minister would be most unwise if he did not realise that it is a time for delivery, because delivery has been put off for so long. The Government succeeded in persuading the British people to give them a second chance to deliver. The argument that they needed more time worked, but it will not work again. People will demand delivery.

During the general election, the Prime Minister promised the country 20,000 more nurses, 10,000 more doctors, 6,000 extra police recruits and an extra 10,000 teachers. But the public know, as he knows, that he cannot at the moment even keep the doctors, nurses, teachers and police that we already have. He has said that Britain will boast world-class public services by the next election, but he will find that urgent task all the more difficult if he has no public servants to run them.

It will not work to turn the Government into the head teacher of every school, the manager of every hospital or the superintendent of every police station. It will not work to make promises about inputs into public services when people want outputs; they need to see results.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hague: I will give way in a moment.

It will not work to make claims that things are getting better if people's daily experience is that they are getting worse. It will not work to keep shifting targets and measures so as to make it harder to judge them. That applies right across the public services. Let us take the national health service as an example.

It seems that I was not the only person who had to face up to bad statistics on the morning of Friday 8 June; there were bad statistics in the NHS as well. An increase of 16,000 people on the waiting list was announced on the day after the election. I know how hard the Government must have worked to compile those figures quicker, and how disappointed they must have been that it proved possible to issue them only just a few hours after the polls had closed—so disappointed that they have decided to abandon the entire waiting-list initiative.

The pledge to cut waiting lists appeared on all those posters, mugs and credit cards at the previous election. Achieving it adorned speech after speech in this House from Government Members. Time and again, we pressed on the Government the fact that the target was distorting clinical priorities and should be abandoned. Time and again, the Health Secretary said that he would not do so, but within a few days of the election the initiative has been abandoned. At the 1997 election, we were told that we had 24 hours to save the NHS by introducing a waiting-list initiative, but in 2001 it took 24 hours to abolish it.

Unfortunately, it seems that the real lessons of that initiative have not been learned. The Government have replaced one set of targets with another. Maximum waiting-time targets are better chosen than their predecessor, but still substitute political priorities and headlines for clinical decisions. They will still distort clinical behaviour.

The Government should be warned not to fall into the trap of believing that passing legislation on public services is the same as improving those services. They should not be fooled into thinking that administrative changes in Whitehall alone bring about a greater chance of delivery. That delivery is in the hands of countless thousands of men and women who joined the public services to serve the public. They want to be allowed to get on with their jobs.

The Government have announced in the Queen's Speech a Bill to help the police fight crime and to reform the criminal courts. If that results in the police being able to spend more time detecting and preventing crime, patrolling our streets and catching criminals, it will deserve widespread support in the House. If, on the other hand, it means more targets, rules and regulations, and even more paperwork, the Government will have learned nothing from what police officers have said to them in recent times.

The Queen's Speech promises more freedom for successful teachers and governors, and more diversity in schools. Given that the Government have spent the past four years abolishing grant-maintained schools, threatening grammar schools with ballots over their very existence and weighing down teachers with a directive a day since the beginning of last year, they will forgive us a little scepticism. If they are now genuine about rolling back uniformity, bureaucracy and centralised control, that will help a great deal. If, however, that means laying down in ever more detail what every teacher should be doing with every hour of every working day, the Government will not succeed in attracting and retaining the teachers that the country needs.

The same argument applies to the economy as a whole. The Queen's Speech commits the Government to economic stability and a more prosperous society. In *The Wall Street Journal* yesterday, the Chancellor said:

"Margaret Thatcher rightly emphasised the importance of the enterprise culture",

but that

"she didn't go far enough".

Now we know what all those years of protest and Tribune group meetings were about: he wanted the Conservative Governments of the 1980s to go even further. We can all picture him with his placard: "Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, more, more, more." That is what he was asking for.

The Chancellor did not stand for an enterprise culture then, and he has not stood for it yet. He has run Britain's businesses ragged with rules and regulations. The British Chambers of Commerce says that

"the bottom line is that the sheer quantity of . . . red tape on business is damaging our economy, stifling enterprise"

and so on. The Chancellor might have chosen *The Wall Street Journal* rather than the House in which to set out

his programme for this Session of Parliament, but readers will not have forgotten what that newspaper said on 15 May:

"Chancellor Gordon Brown has presided over the largest peace time increase in taxation ever witnessed in the United Kingdom."

No wonder Britain has dropped from ninth to 19th in the world competitiveness table.

Now, the Chancellor says that he wants to make British businesses more competitive. If he really means to reverse the regulatory burden on business, genuinely wants to remove stealth taxes and is serious about giving up pathological meddling in the affairs of businesses, we Conservatives will support the measures that he introduces, but until that happens we are entitled to remain sceptical that his conversion to our cause is in any way genuine.

The Government should not fall into the trap of thinking that passing legislation is the same as delivering, or that making administrative changes is a substitute for delivery. The creation of a new Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs does not, of itself, begin to deal with the chronic crisis facing our countryside. Rural communities expect something more than a new nameplate on a Government building: they expect a change of direction from the Government.

Seven weeks after the Prime Minister told the country that we were on the home straight, it is clear that foot and mouth is not beaten: it is rife in my constituency and others, with many new cases reported in the past two weeks. I believe that the Government should be honest about the extent of the crisis. Official figures put the number of cases at about 1,800, but it could be twice as high owing to cases on farms where precautionary culling has taken place.

The case for a full and independent public inquiry into the causes of foot and mouth and the measures taken by the Government to tackle it is overwhelming. A Government who wasted no time establishing an inquiry into the previous Government's handling of BSE and even found time to apologise formally for the Irish potato famine of 1845 must see fit to commit themselves to having their own response to the foot and mouth crisis properly examined. The case for an inquiry is clear—let us have a full and independent public inquiry.

People living in rural areas will be outraged that the Queen's Speech contains no reference to the crisis in the countryside and the urgent need to adopt measures to help it to recover, and that the only mention of rural affairs is a free vote on the future of hunting with dogs. The Government should produce a strategy for the recovery of the countryside. We have made many suggestions. Those are the real priorities on which people who live in rural Britain expect the Government to concentrate. It is time to deliver, and on that delivery the Government will be judged.

In this country and the rest of the European Union there are growing signs that people feel disconnected from the political process. Those who spoke before me have mentioned that. If people see policies steamrollered through and are told that there is no alternative, they will take an increasingly cynical view of the democratic institutions that should be their proud inheritance. The Government, and all parties, would do well to reflect on that in the months and years ahead, but I see no immediate sign of that in today's Queen's Speech.

[Mr. Hague]

The speech makes it clear that the Government intend to introduce legislation to ratify the Nice treaty, but it does so against the background of a referendum in Ireland that decisively rejected ratification of the treaty by that country. The concerns expressed by Irish voters are more widely shared. One EU diplomat said last week:

"If there had been a referendum in every country, half would have voted against it. The Irish were acting as proxies for the rest of us and this needs to be handled with care".

The Government could begin a new term with a new approach of being open with the British people about, for example, their plans for taking Britain into the euro. Since the election, we have heard that the Government's policy on the pound is to keep back as much information as they can about their true intentions. We have heard how the then Foreign Secretary was allegedly under orders not to speak his mind on that subject for fear of jeopardising the Prime Minister's election prospects—but the Prime Minister now has that second term, so surely we can look forward to his having the courage to make the case, and to allow his colleagues to do so as well, for the policy to which the Government have said they are deeply committed as a matter of principle.

It is not only on Europe that we need to consider the disconnection between political institutions and those whom they are intended to serve. In the Queen's Speech, the Government say that they will consult on stage 2 of reform of the Lords. We hope that that consultation will be widespread and genuine. However, respect for and participation in our democratic process will be enhanced only if we reform the relationship between government and Parliament, including, in particular, the House of Commons. Otherwise, the disconnection between politicians and the public that we saw in the general election promises to become even greater.

All of us in the House, in all parties, should be chastened by levels of voter apathy that resulted in the lowest turnout at a general election since 1918, with the number of voters staying at home exceeding the number who turned out to vote for the winning party. Elections to this place should be the cornerstone of democratic accountability in our country, yet millions of people are not sufficiently motivated to take part in them. The blunt truth is that people increasingly see politics and Parliament as remote from their lives. They do not think that they matter. They no longer see Parliament as a place in which they can get things done.

Why should any of this be surprising when many Governments, but especially that in the previous Parliament, have taken every opportunity to sideline, marginalise and bypass Parliament, with the consequence that its standing and reputation are lower than at any time in living memory? We face an urgent task to reform Parliament, to make it relevant to the people whom it is supposed to serve and to place it once again at the centre of our national life. Without a strong Parliament, democratic accountability in Britain ceases to exist.

I urge the Prime Minister to look again at proposals to reform the House. These include putting the parliamentary timetable in the hands of Committees, to make the publication of Bills in draft standard practice, to improve the scrutiny of secondary legislation and delegated instruments, to make substantial improvements to the

examination of European legislation, to allow civil servants to supply information to Parliament and to enable deeper questioning of Ministers. The Prime Minister should look again at proposals to give Select Committees more teeth by taking appointments to those Committees out of the hands of party managers. The Queen's Speech contains none of those things. It contains nothing to improve the accountability of the Government to Parliament, and nothing to increase the accountability of the Government and Parliament to the people.

There are lessons for us all, on both sides of the House, in the election that has just passed. Party leaders and Prime Ministers may come and go—but our democracy must endure. The work of this place must mean something to those whose views we have been elected to represent. We need the Government to be honest and straightforward about what they are trying to achieve, about where they succeed and about where they fail. We need the Government to understand the value of being held genuinely and fully accountable to the British people through this place. We need also the Government to trust those who work in our public services and those who rely on them. A Government who do those things need not fear judgment at the ballot box in future. A Government who fail in those things risk losing something far more precious than power at the next election.

3.28 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): I begin by congratulating you, Mr. Speaker, on your re-election to Parliament and to the office of Speaker. I know that you will continue to serve the whole House with integrity.

I give my thanks to the proposer and seconder of the Gracious Speech. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) proposed the motion in his usual energetic manner. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer tells me that he will be drinking a toast to him later. My hon. Friend worked hard for his constituents and his party during some 18 difficult years in opposition, when the Labour party was out of power and it seemed that it would never get back into government; indeed, at times it even seemed likely to split asunder. In fact, my hon. Friend is available for therapy consultations with Conservative Members if needed.

My hon. Friend's service to the House during those years in opposition and afterwards is well recognised. In particular, his service as Joint Chairman of the Select Committee on Education and Employment has been valued by Members on both sides of the House. He is widely recognised as contributing greatly to policy and practice in both areas.

I know that my hon. Friend supports the historic and ancient team of Huddersfield Town football club as well as rugby league. I know also that it is a sensitive issue that is close to his heart. However, he will note that Huddersfield—like the Tory party, that other historic and ancient institution—play in blue, have had a terrible season and were relegated, but at least they have not lost their manager.

May I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) for an outstanding speech seconding the Gracious Speech? His passion for his constituency of Tottenham, like that of his predecessor, Bernie Grant, shone through his contribution, as did his

defence of the Government's efforts to make life better for his constituents. As he said, this Friday marks his first anniversary in the House. I learned of his sound judgment during the course of the by-election, not merely afterwards when he failed to return my call, but beforehand, when he had to choose the photograph to go on his leaflet. He could have had a photograph of himself with me, but instead he chose as endorsement a photograph of himself with the manageress of his local fried chicken store. I thought that that was absolutely right.

As for the speech of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Leader of the Opposition, may I tell him that it was a vintage Hague performance? It was extraordinarily witty and eloquent, which is what we expect of him. Whatever else, and whatever disagreements we may have had, he has been a formidable adversary in the House. I wish him well in future, as we all do. The election to succeed him promises to be interesting. I understand that there are four names in the ring: one is in repentance, one is in hope, one is expectation and one is in Vietnam. However, whoever replaces the right hon. Gentleman will struggle to match the resilience he has shown in difficult circumstances—one of the qualities, I hope, that will continue to be demanded of whoever is leader of the Conservative party.

Amid all that is new, I hope that the House will forgive me for pointing out one thing that, in a sense, is new but which has also stayed the same. For the first time in our history, a second-term Labour Government are sitting on this side of the House, ready, willing and able to fulfil a full Parliament and build on the work that we have begun. Hendon; Hove; Hastings and Rye; Enfield, Southgate; Eastwood; and Birmingham, Edgbaston have Labour Members of Parliament again. Who would have thought that my hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) and for Kettering (Phil Sawford)—who, I seem to remember, were taunted by Opposition Members with cries of "Goodbye" every time they spoke—would be returned with increased majorities at the election? I offer particular congratulations to two people on my own side: one took Ynys Môn from the Welsh nationalists—it returned to the Labour fold after 22 years; and in Dorset, the place where trade unionism first flourished, a Labour Member of Parliament was returned for the first time ever at a general election.

However, the importance lies not in my hon. Friends' being returned, but in what we can achieve. That means, for example, that the poorest paid people in our country will receive an average increase of £8 a week in October, when the minimum wage goes up. It means that pensioners this winter will be assured of the £200 winter fuel allowance and free TV licences for those over 75. It means record investment in our schools—more teachers, more books, better school buildings and higher standards—and it means record investment in our health service too.

This is a Queen's Speech that bears out the mandate that we were given. It is a Queen's Speech for enterprise to build on stability; a Queen's Speech for public services; a Queen's Speech that puts schools and hospitals first. The public have signalled their priorities: the economy, health, education and crime. Today, we again signal ours: the economy, health, education and crime. I say to the Leader of the Opposition that of course we must look at

ways of making Parliament more effective, but the biggest thing that will repay people's faith in politics is our carrying out the programme on which we were elected.

In our first term, we altered the entire system of economic management with Bank of England independence and new fiscal rules, which have given Britain today the lowest inflation in Europe, 1 million more jobs in the economy and interest rates half what they were in 18 years of Conservative government. I believe that today the Labour Government are the Government of economic competence for our country. In 1997, 42p of every extra £1 of public spending went on social security and on interest payments on the nation's debt. Today, the figure is 16p. Today, Britain has the fourth largest economy in the world, the national debt is falling and youth unemployment has been halved. Those are not abstract economic figures; they mark real improvements in this country and in the living standards of our people.

It is on those foundations that we must now fulfil our mandate for the second term—to continue building first-class public services and to introduce measures to boost productivity and enterprise, bringing prosperity to every region of our nation. That is why, during the next three years, spending on health will rise by 5.6 per cent. per year, on education by 5.4 per cent. and on criminal justice by 4.2 per cent. year on year. Transport spending and overall capital investment will rise by more than 10 per cent. a year during the next three years.

That is important, because it is our belief, borne out in the course of the election campaign, that public services are not optional extras to be sacrificed to short-term expediency or unaffordable tax cuts. Good public services are the vital infrastructure for rising prosperity in our country. They are the indispensable platform of security and opportunity for each individual citizen.

The Queen's Speech launches the most fundamental programme of reform in the public services for many years. The individual citizen is the focus of all our reforms—the pupil first, the patient first, the victim of crime first. Putting the individual first requires big investment and reform, and that was the issue during the general election.

The election marked Britain's desire to move beyond Thatcherism. The Conservative party lost because it lost the arguments about the kind of country that the British people want Britain to be, and I am pleased to say that I see precious little sign that it has changed its mind. As far as I can make out from studying the positions of many of the new intake of Conservatives, the only way to resolve the leadership question is for the title to be renounced, the by-election held and the mummy to come back to the Dispatch Box. If not that, I am told that the Conservative party's saviour looks set to be the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) who is now, I understand, the moderate candidate for the Conservative party leadership—the man who brought in the poll tax, who in 1992 at the Treasury presided over interest rates of 10 per cent. and who was the author of the Conservatives' spending cuts programme at the election. If he is the answer to the Conservative party's prayers, may I say, in a spirit of cross-party consensus, that he may also be the answer to ours?

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): On the question of public services and the indication of increased

[Mr. Alex Salmond]

private finance in the health and education systems—to which the Prime Minister alluded during the election campaign and which is alluded to again in the Gracious Speech—after the huge success of private funding in the railways, how much private money does the Prime Minister anticipate for the health and education systems, and according to what time scale does he intend to introduce the creeping privatisation of the public services?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we opposed the privatisation of the railways and we certainly do not intend introducing that in any part of our public services. But in respect of private finance, in, for example, the national health service, we have had the largest hospital-building programme since the war, with the hospitals being built to cost and on time. I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would have learned that that was a sensible way of proceeding.

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I congratulate the Prime Minister on leading his party to its election success.

On public services, which the Prime Minister, like the Liberal Democrats, chose as the key issue for the election campaign, and given his commitment to recruit all the extra teachers, nurses, doctors and police that we need, will he give one additional commitment at the beginning of this term—that when those people come into the public services, by the end of this Government, public sector workers' pay will be nearer, if not equal to, that of someone doing a comparable job in the private sector? We shall never have good public services if the equivalent job is far better paid in the private sector.

The Prime Minister: That is true, and I shall come later to how we recruit and retain people in the public services, but one point that I must deal with is the idea that no progress was made in those areas in our first term in office. In education, for example, some 17,000 schools were modernised. Partly as a result of the new deal money, which the Liberal Democrats opposed—[*Interruption.*] They say that they opposed not the new deal but the funding. Outside the Liberal Democrat party, however, it is a generally accepted view that if one has a programme, one has to fund it. We believe that the Liberal Democrats, too, will appreciate that in time.

As a result of phasing out assisted places, there are 450,000 fewer infants in classes of more than 30 pupils, and 150,000 more 11-year-olds are passing their tests in English and maths. In health, there are already 17,000 more nurses, but we need far more. As I said, a huge hospital-building programme is under way. On law and order, crime is down overall by 10 per cent. and domestic burglary and car crime are down by 21 per cent. On welfare reform, there are already, after the past four years, some 860,000 fewer benefit claimants.

Our mandate, of course, is now to do more. In education and health and in putting the pupil and the patient first, that means reform to achieve three specific goals: universally high standards; services built around choice with sufficient diversity to achieve it; and devolution to the front line, thus empowering staff who deliver on the ground—teachers, doctors, nurses and police. So, standards, choice and front line first are the goals for the second term.

In education, secondary schools are now the priority. Over the next year, we will extend the literacy and numeracy strategies into the early secondary years. We will set ambitious targets for improved test results: at least 75 per cent. of 14-year-olds are to be up to the required standard in English and maths within three years. We will give new vocational routes for pupils beyond the age of 14 and greater challenge for the most able pupils in our schools. The education Bill will free up successful schools without the abolition of local education authorities—a Conservative party proposal that would be damaging. It will free up successful schools and also provide far more effective action to turn around weak schools, including partnership with the voluntary and private sectors in promoting greater diversity.

By next September, from a total of almost 4,000 secondary schools, we intend to ensure that 830 are already specialist schools, each with a centre of excellence in a key area of the curriculum. In five years, that number will increase to at least 1,500. There will also be significantly more city academies, faith schools and schools managed by external sponsors—all with a strong individual ethos and a mission to raise standards, putting pupils first and extending parental choice.

Bob Russell (Colchester): Two tier! We are returning to secondary moderns.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman shouts about secondary moderns. Some 93 per cent. of these specialist schools have a fully comprehensive intake. I have one in my constituency that has raised standards across the curriculum. I say again to the Liberal Democrats that it is not simply money that public services need; they also need change and reform, and they will get it with us. The aim of all these reforms is clear: to ensure that all children—whatever their background, wherever they live and whatever the wealth of their parents—get the chance to succeed and make the most of their abilities.

On health, we will reduce maximum waiting times year by year as we invest in reforms. Maximum waiting times for in-patients will be reduced progressively from 18 months to six months within four years. Within that period, we expect average waiting times to fall from three months to seven weeks, with urgent cases being seen faster. We will also devolve directly to the front line. The NHS reform and decentralisation Bill will radically alter the power structures in the health service. By 2004, the primary care trusts, to which more power will be devolved, will control 75 per cent. of the NHS budget. The number of health authorities will be reduced by two thirds, and we will engage with voluntary and private providers when that helps to meet our commitment to improving patient care within the national health service.

All those reforms are to one end: to ensure that the national health service, which is the proudest creation of a Labour Government, is rebuilt and modernised on the fundamental principle that good health care should not and must not depend on ability to pay, but on need.

We will also legislate to reform the criminal justice system; to modernise the rules of evidence to simplify trials in order to bring the guilty to justice; and to establish a new recovery agency to seize the assets of serious criminals. We will continue to invest in the police and work with them on a reform programme to improve

performance and give more power to local police commanders. We plan to establish a criminal courts system that is fully equipped to tackle modern crime patterns, with more of the 100,000 persistent offenders who are responsible for the vast bulk of crime in our communities being brought to justice. Every active offender will be on the DNA database by 2004. There will be greater protection against sex offenders, the law on corruption will be reformed and we want to double the assets that are seized from criminals and drug dealers. I want Britain to be the toughest place in the western world to be a drug dealer.

As all hon. Members know, improvements to our transport infrastructure are vital. We inherited a system that had been undermined by decades of neglect and under-investment. We are emerging only now from the post-Hatfield collapse of the rail system. The transport plan, with £180 billion of investment, sets out the necessary changes in the next 10 years. The backlog of road investment is also being tackled.

To take up the point that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) made, we know that we must take further steps to improve the recruitment, retention and motivation of staff throughout the public sector. I stress to hon. Members that that again means extra investment; the improvements will not happen without it. We have pledged 6,000 extra police recruits, 10,000 extra teachers, 10,000 extra doctors, 20,000 extra classroom assistants and 20,000 extra nurses. That requires more trainees and improved incentives to attract them.

Postgraduate applications for teaching have increased by 25 per cent. since last year, thanks to new training salaries, bonuses and the promise to write off student loans for recruits in many subjects. The number of nurses in training is increasing, thanks partly to bonuses for those in areas with a high cost of living. There is a target to recruit 40 per cent. more medical students by 2004.

We need not only more staff, but improved rewards, better training, modernised working practices and far greater opportunities for staff to fulfil their potential. This year, the performance pay scheme for teachers is likely to provide an increase of £2,000 for more than 150,000 teachers.

Old demarcations in working practices have to go. Classroom assistants can make a big contribution to learning, thus freeing teachers to teach. Nurses can be trained to take on some of the tasks that doctors currently perform, and general practitioners are often able to perform minor surgery. Greater use can be made of physiotherapists and other NHS disciplines to free consultants' time.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Instead of making comments about Conservative results, will the Prime Minister answer a simple question? What were the public trying to tell him, given that the Labour party polled 3 million fewer votes in this general election than in 1997—a lower result than the Conservatives achieved in 1992? Were not the public saying that the Prime Minister had failed last time, and they did not believe he would succeed next time?

The Prime Minister: That we lost rather than won the election is an interesting speculation. There are issues

relating to turnout, and perhaps I shall comment on them shortly. However, it is important to emphasise that we have a mandate for the change and reform that we set out. I wish the right hon. Gentleman well—whoever the next leader of the Conservative party might be, I know that the right hon. Gentleman will be there to challenge him.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): If student loans are not a disincentive and a problem, why offer to write them off for teachers?

The Prime Minister: If, as employers, we need to recruit people into teaching, it is important to provide an added incentive in subjects where there is a shortage of people. We could write off everyone's loans, but I stress to the hon. Gentleman, as I emphasise to Liberal Democrat Members, that such incentives have to be paid for. If people want them to be paid for, it is sensible to do that by making the investment when we can, based on a strong economy. We should not make promises that we cannot keep. Hon. Members in the hon. Gentleman's position can make whatever promises they want because they know that they will never have the responsibility of fulfilling them.

The Queen's Speech makes it clear that there will be a continuing programme of welfare reform. The changes that we have announced to Government structure underline our belief that work is the best route out of poverty to fulfilment. The welfare reform Bill will represent a further widening of the opportunity and responsibility agenda in the benefits system. As we extend greater help to people who could work but do not, we will enforce greater responsibility to take that work.

The Bill will increase the standard rate of statutory maternity pay to £100 a week and extend the payment period from 18 to 26 weeks. That means an extra £1,200 in maternity pay for the 360,000 women expected to have babies each year. That is all part of our commitment to helping people to balance work and family.

The minimum wage will also be raised, first to £4.10 and then to £4.20 an hour, helping 1.5 million people to escape poverty pay. The working families tax credit will be maintained, benefiting 1.2 million families, and we are putting millions into sure start, child benefit and support for Britain's poorest families so that we can build on the figure of 1 million children already lifted out of poverty in the past four years. In addition, the tax credit Bill will set out the next steps in the programme to tackle child poverty.

The pension credit Bill will mean that from 2003—for the first time in the history of the social welfare system—pensioners will be rewarded rather than penalised for having worked and saved to provide for themselves. Above all, we will continue the new deal for the unemployed, extending it to the disabled, to single parents and to those who could work but are not. We stood on a clear manifesto pledge to extend the new deal. The Conservative party pledged to scrap it. To those who say that the election was not about big choices I say, "Tell that to the 290,000 young people lifted off benefit and into work as a result of the new deal."

On Europe, the European Communities (Finance) Bill will implement the excellent deal on future financing that we secured at Berlin in 1999. We will legislate to ratify the treaty of Nice, which gives more voting power to the

[The Prime Minister]

UK, secures more qualified majority voting when it is in our interests and is at the heart of the commitment to enlargement. Our position on the single currency remains as we set it out in the manifesto and during the election: in principle, in favour; in practice, the economic conditions must be met. The final say in any decision will be with the British people in a referendum. In this election, the British people decisively rejected the narrow nationalism and monomania of the Conservative party on Europe. I hope that, for the good of the country, the Conservatives will learn that lesson.

International development will be another key second-term priority. We will write off £1.9 billion worth of debt of the world's poorest countries, increase aid and development by £0.7 billion, and establish it in law, through the Queen's Speech, that reducing poverty, not tying aid to trade, is the paramount aim of any aid and development assistance that we give.

Although the enterprise, education, health and crime Bills are the flagship Bills in this reform agenda, there are others. I welcome what the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks said in his welcome for adoption reform. There are also Bills on commonhold and leasehold reform, reform of land registration and so on. To pick up the point made by the right hon. Gentleman earlier, we will also work to eradicate foot and mouth disease and to provide a viable future for British agriculture.

To those who say that the Queen's Speech does not contain every Bill that the people might have wanted, I say that it is always the case that many more Bills are introduced than are listed in the Queen's Speech. Indeed, I understand that following the 1997 Queen's Speech, some 30 Bills were eventually added. Many of the provisions that people have mentioned—such as laws relating to drinking and to tobacco, for example—are ones for which we can legislate if we have the time, which I hope we shall.

Elections are about big issues and big choices. The public at this election rejected policies of boom and bust. They rejected cuts in public services. They rejected the belief that there is no such thing as society. They rejected the idea of Britain turning its back on the world. The British public chose economic stability, and that is our choice. They chose enterprise, and that is our choice. They chose investment and reform in public services. That is our choice. They chose to put schools and hospitals first. That is our choice. They chose leadership and engagement in the world, and that is our choice, too. In making the choices that they did, the British people have given us our mandate. We know exactly what they demand from us, and we fully intend to deliver it.

3.53 pm

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): May I begin, on behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Liberal Democrats, by joining in the deserved tributes to the two hon. Members who opened the proceedings this afternoon?

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) and I have known each other in a very friendly way since I first became a Member of this House in 1983. I notice that he has been described, in one of those guides that

give almost unrecognisable descriptions of people whom one has known for a long time, as a Europhile Blairite, whatever that might be. Much more interestingly, he describes the previous Conservative Government as having a nervous timidity as far as Europe is concerned. How unlike his own Government.

I do not know what the question was, but in 1999 the hon. Gentleman was awarded something called the "golden pager award" for the year's most obsequious question in the House. I think that we should be told what it was—I may table a written question. It is a good question to ask. If I were the hon. Gentleman, I would be most concerned by one description of him: Matthew Parris described him as "lived in". I do not know what Matthew Parris meant by that particular reference, but it is none the less in the hon. Gentleman's biography.

The Guardian blows hot and cold, certainly about those of us who consider ourselves on the general centre-left of politics. Some days we love it and some days we hate it; I suspect that, on balance, we hate it more than we love it. Usually, an endorsement by *The Guardian* is a kiss of death, whether one is in the Labour party or the Liberal Democrat party. However, some time ago, it referred to a wonderful speech that the hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) had delivered on poverty and social exclusion and said that, on the strength of that speech, the Prime Minister should give him a job. That has not happened yet, but I think that I speak for people of all parties in the House this afternoon by saying that, on the strength of his speech this afternoon, it cannot be too long before the Prime Minister does that. We wish him well.

May I add one personal point by way of an introduction to my speech? Over the past couple of years, the leader of the Conservative party and I have had our principled political disagreements, but in personal and professional life and in dealings that party leaders have with each other, he has always been charming, civil, good humoured and good company. I wish him good fortune. On a personal level, I really do.

It has been a privilege for me to lead the Liberal Democrats during the recent election campaign. I am not one of life's great historians, but those around about me who are tell me that, in terms of numbers in the House of Commons, this is our strongest showing since 1923. I should like to thank all my colleagues for the tremendous support and effort that they contributed during the campaign. In particular, I welcome the 14 new colleagues who join us in the House for this Parliament.

Obviously, that was a good aspect of the election for us. A bad aspect for all of us was the decline in active participation by the public as a whole. That must set the alarm bells ringing for those in all political parties. Seventy-five per cent. of people eligible to vote did not vote for the Government whom the country elected. They were elected quite fairly under the rules—I would like to change the rules but they have been fairly established—but the fact that 75 per cent. of people have not actively endorsed the Government of the day is a problem not just for the Government but for the Parliament that is elected with the Government. That is the smallest mandate in modern times for any Government of any party. The Government must bear that sobering thought in mind as they take the Queen's Speech forward.

The Queen's Speech should be judged on what it does for the predominant issues of the election. I submit to the House that those issues were not the euro or asylum

seekers, but the quality of public services: how one delivers quality and enhanced public services, and how one fairly provides the finance for them—for schools, hospitals, pensioners and rural communities. Those issues affect so many people.

All politicians encountered that. To an extent, we can leave party politics to one side just for this afternoon because the verdict has been delivered. The Prime Minister experienced it personally; the leader of the Conservative party heard it from people as he travelled round the country; and the same happened to me. People genuinely felt that those public services had been neglected during the previous four years, which had occasioned an expectation after the previous 18 years.

We must judge the Queen's Speech on those issues, but we must also judge it on what it proposes to do for the environment. The Labour party promised to put the environment at the heart of government. If one looks at the track record, one realises that it has manifestly failed. Equally, there is great concern about the future of civil liberties and the erosion of those liberties, given some of the commitments in the Queen's Speech. If there is one thing about which my colleagues and I are absolutely determined—and if the Liberal Democrats are here for a purpose in this or any other Parliament—it is to champion the cause of environmentalism and individual civil liberties. Increasingly—this emerged during the election campaign—we must be seen and heard to be speaking up for those issues because not enough people elsewhere in the House are doing so.

There is also the problem of reconnecting the public with politics and the political process as a whole. I very much welcome the new Leader of the House to his responsibilities and I hope that he will be able to make his distinctive contribution in the way that we go about our business as an institution and in trying to make that more relevant to the people outside. That means that we must reform Parliament so that it is more democratic, accessible and understandable to the people we are supposed to be here to represent and to do our best for.

Those are the key areas in which the voters want the re-elected Labour Government to do better than the voters felt they did in their first term.

On the specifics of the Queen's Speech, education has to be watched very closely indeed. The Prime Minister's response to one intervention more than confirmed that. I was watching and listening to him as he replied, but I was also watching with equal interest the expressions on many of the faces behind him. There is a fine divide between a so-called successful school given over to the private sector and an independent school. The Government will have to be very careful indeed about the legislation to ensure that they do not simply preside over an unplanned dismantling of the state education system. That could be what is about to happen. Parliament has a real job to do to ensure that it does not.

As the Prime Minister said, the Government are creating many different layers of school. He listed them: the specialist schools, city academies, church and other faith schools and, rightly at the bottom of the pile perhaps, the celebrated, so-called, "bog standard comprehensive". We have to be careful that the legislation does not amount to privatisation and complication by stealth.

We do not oppose private sector involvement in the provision of school services. As a principle, that is not something that should be difficult for any party in the House. However, it must be demonstrated that that is the most efficient and effective way to deliver the services and that it is better than a purely public sector alternative. The Government have not yet demonstrated that and they did not make it clear in the election campaign exactly what they meant when they alluded to such issues.

What is missing? The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) asked a good question during the Prime Minister's speech. What is missing from the education provisions in the Queen's Speech is simple: it is the abolition of student tuition fees. Any Member of Parliament of any party who has in the past month faced a student audience or a potential student audience, such as high school pupils, for example, can only have been living on a different planet if he or she did not hear expressed the unanimous viewpoint time and again that fees are a disincentive, are discriminatory, that they put off children from lower income households and that they are totally self-defeating for our society in the long term. Hon. Members should not take it just from the Liberal Democrats. The Labour party in the Scottish Executive agrees with that argument and is implementing a policy as a result. It is high time that that was done in the House of Commons as well.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, while there has been much discussion, especially from Liberal Democrats on the stump, about tuition fees and the £1,400 that students pay on average, that is still £600 less than the £2,000 charge that his party wants to introduce?

Mr. Kennedy: The hon. Gentleman should have the decency and dignity to accept that on this issue his party has lost the argument. *[Interruption.]* A little less synthetic rage, please. It has lost the argument because the Labour party in government in one part of the United Kingdom has acknowledged that the argument is not valid. That is why we are right and why we intend to stick by our policy.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) *rose—*

Mr. Kennedy: The hon. Gentleman knows me. I do not want to detain the House, and I do not want to overstretch him, so he should take his seat.

Turning from education to health—

Mr. Skinner *rose—*

Mr. Kennedy: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Skinner: The right hon. Gentleman failed to answer the question. It is simple. He talks about fees up front, but the Liberal party policy is for students to pay £2,000 at the back. He had better make his mind up. Which is more—£2,000 for every pupil at the back or £1,400 at the front for some?

Mr. Kennedy: A good and honourable left winger such as the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner)—

Mr. Skinner: I voted against tuition fees.

Mr. Kennedy: Well, there you are. You can rat, but you can't re-rat, as the man once said. The point is that the

[*Mr. Kennedy*]

hon. Gentleman should surely endorse what the Liberal Democrats have helped to implement in Scotland. Poorer students are now enjoying an endowment access that was never available under the principles that have been implemented. Such access is a socially egalitarian measure, which should commend itself wholeheartedly to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): Another way of looking at it is that, under the Government's scheme for student financing, half of all students pay no fees at all. Those students would pay the £2,000 end-weighted fee under the system that the right hon. Gentleman's party supports in Scotland.

Mr. Kennedy: I respect the hon. Gentleman very much, as he knows, but the Labour party doth protest too much on this issue. Labour Members need only listen to what the students are saying and look at the figures. Why is it that applications from Scottish students for Scottish universities are increasing and from English and Welsh students to English and Welsh universities are falling? That cannot be divorced from the debt that is being imposed on students.

The Prime Minister also said that he wanted a mandate for investment in the health service. He spent the past four years blaming his predecessors in office for the problems in the health service. It is fair to say—we joined in the criticism in opposition in those days—that many faults were attributable to the previous Administration. However, sticking for three of the past four years to the Tory spending plans, which even the occasional Member for Vietnam, as he is this week, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), has acknowledged that he would never have stuck to had he been in office, resulted in a failure to invest in the staff, beds and equipment that the health service needed.

So what do the Government propose in their reform Bill? The Bill will do nothing to improve public health, health promotion and preventive care. It will do nothing either to improve staff morale, which, as anyone knows, is very low in our health service, or the disastrously poor performance of the health service in some areas of the country.

When the Queen's Speech states that the Government propose to give patients greater influence, do the Government actually mean that they intend to abolish the community health councils? They do not speak in that language explicitly in the Queen's Speech. When they claim to decentralise power, in many respects, they will do exactly the opposite.

The speech seems to suggest that Wales will be able to do differently from the rest of the United Kingdom. It is ironic, is it not, that while the Government are centralising health services in the rest of the UK, they are allowing decentralisation in Wales. Wales will be able to retain community health councils, but that will not happen in England. That, surely, is rather an inconsistent approach.

There is no mention of mental health reform—surely a huge issue for Parliament to tackle. But most revealing of all, there is no commitment to free long-term care for the elderly. That issue will come back to haunt the Government.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and I applaud his tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague).

Given the welcome advances in medical science and the fact that whenever a new cure is devised a new queue is necessarily created, what lessons does the right hon. Gentleman think that we can learn from our continental partners about the use of private resources to complement the contribution of the state sector in the provision of health care in Britain?

Mr. Kennedy: Principally, and in direct response to the hon. Gentleman, we need to learn two lessons. The first is that, in our liberal democratic society, if people have the income—the purchasing power—to choose to go private, whether for education, health or anything else, they should not be restricted by the dead hand of the state in doing so. But what the state must make it its business to get right is to ensure that the majority, who are not in that fortunate income category, have the right to aspire to and, indeed, to demand from the state decency and quality of public services at the point of need. What the state must not do is to provide—as the hon. Gentleman's Government did in days gone by—a tax incentive for the former at the expense of the latter. That is one principle that we need to learn from our continental competitors.

The other principle that the hon. Gentleman's party needs to learn from the experience of the past few weeks is that there is an inescapable contradiction between supposing that there can be a European level of quality of service alongside a North American tax policy. That does not work. The public gave a resounding reply to that argument when it was put by two of three parties during the election.

Mr. Redwood: Given that only 12 per cent. of the electorate voted for the right hon. Gentleman's amazing statement that a penny on income tax would transform all our public services, has he not learned that they did not believe him then and they will not believe him in the future, or does he say that the other 80 per cent. of the electorate were wrong?

Bob Russell: That is a leadership bid!

Mr. Kennedy: I hope that it is not for our party—that really would frighten the children in the liberal democracy ranks. I shall not rehearse in detail the arguments of the election. The penny on income tax and the money it raises are specifically for education. The one thing that the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) shares with the Prime Minister is that that has been persistently misrepresented by them both over a number of years—and well they both know it.

On civil liberties, there are obviously several issues—not least in respect of the draft criminal courts reform Bill—that will have to be examined with considerable care, both in this place and especially in the House of

Lords, where the rights of the individual citizen and the operation of the judicial process are concerned. The review of the criminal courts under Lord Justice Auld is obviously welcome. However, in our view it would be unacceptable to rush through legislation before his report has been published and properly considered. That report has not yet been published. However, we will strongly and resolutely oppose—as we did in the previous Parliament—any re-introduced moves by the Government that would further restrict the right of the individual citizen to trial by jury in this country. For us, that is a fundamental principle, which we will defend completely. I believe that we have made common cause with the Conservatives in the other place and I suspect that we shall continue to do so on that matter.

We must be extremely cautious of giving juries greater access to information on defendants' previous convictions, because that could increase the likelihood of miscarriages of justice. It is better to legislate with some consideration than to do so in haste and live to regret it in terms of citizens' rights.

May I raise a specific point about the politics of the euro, the single European currency, which does not feature in today's Queen's Speech? A couple of years ago, the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, myself, the former Deputy Prime Minister—now Lord Heseltine—and the former Chancellor all sat together in the Prime Minister's study the day before we launched the Britain in Europe campaign, and a very good, positive discussion we had, too. But, as is so often the way in party politics and cross-party politics, nothing has happened since the launch. We have had a mixture of mood music from the Cabinet, not least the Chancellor and the Prime Minister. We have had good cop one day, bad cop another.

On that issue, which will be a paramount issue in the politics of this Parliament, we must not repeat that mistake. The Prime Minister will have to follow on from the rather courageous speech that he made during the election campaign, setting out a constructive and rational case for Europe in general and the single currency in principle. That case will have to be made on an all-party basis to turn round public opinion in this country. Although the issue does not feature in today's Queen's Speech, it is an issue of principle and priority for this Parliament and, I hope, for this Government.

Finally, on the environment, the Government have committed themselves in the Queen's Speech to tackle climate change and fulfil this country's international obligations arising from the Kyoto protocol. That is very welcome. However, we must do everything that we can as a country to ensure that America shows a similar degree of respect and commitment. President Bush was wrong to abandon the Kyoto protocol; he should think again. This is one issue where our country must be prepared to be a candid friend where the United States is concerned. The US policy is short-sighted, and self-defeating for humanity. We must give the matter priority.

There are other items that I might discuss but, given the number of Members who want to speak, I do not want to overstay my welcome in the House. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I knew that that particular remark would get a very positive response.

Where constitutional issues are concerned, I particularly welcome the commitment that the Government have entered into to make or enable legislation that will facilitate

the promotion of women in all political parties. We very much subscribe to that aim, but please let us not see such progress in isolation from the reform of voting systems, because experience in this country and elsewhere shows that the fairer and more representative the voting system, the greater the likelihood that more women will be elected. The Scottish Parliament provides a classic illustration of that, so I hope that we shall initiate such reform.

Secondly on matters constitutional, Northern Ireland has been mentioned, and I pledge the Liberal Democrats again to a constructive and non-partisan approach. It is not an issue for point scoring or for playing fast and loose. Let us hope that further progress can be made.

My final comments are very much directed not only to the Prime Minister, but to the new Leader of the House. We need to reform Parliament. We need to consider the reconnection of politics. We need a Committee of both Houses that can take evidence from the public and find out not just what we think about one another, but what they think about all of us and the way in which we go about our business. We might well be rather taken aback by some of the comments that we would hear, but if we listened we might learn a lot.

We might do something else that would benefit the House: continue the cause of regionalism. We have devolved power to Wales and Scotland, and we hope that the Northern Ireland peace process will succeed, but let us deal with the democratic deficit as it exists in England. We need more regional devolution in England, and we are very much committed to that.

During the new Parliament, we shall examine new Departments, such as the rural affairs department, which does not have a single Bill in the Queen's Speech. That is extraordinary, given the problems that have afflicted rural communities lately. There has been no commitment to hold a properly independent public inquiry into foot and mouth disease, which must surely be a priority. There is no legislation to tackle homelessness in what is now the world's fourth largest economy. There is no legislation to repeal the offensive and unacceptable section 28.

The Labour Government have been re-elected for a second term with a remarkably huge majority—undeniably, a great achievement for the Prime Minister and his colleagues—but there is still a poverty of ambition at the centre of the Government that, for many of us in the reformist tradition of politics, remains equally and deeply disappointing.

4.22 pm

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): When the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) was elected to the House in 1983—a pleasant, shy young lad—he seemed to have a sort of promise. I never thought that that promise would be ruined by his becoming leader of the Liberal Democrat party. Ted Heath—to whom he referred last week during your election, Mr. Speaker—described Lonrho as the unacceptable face of capitalism. I am sorry to say that the right hon. Gentleman has become the smiling face of opportunism, which is what the Liberal Democrat party represents. Some political parties—the Conservative party, as well as the Labour party—look at a grievance in different ways and try to find a solution. The Liberal Democrats look at a solution and try to find a grievance.

The right hon. Gentleman said that there was no visible evidence of an improvement in public services during the four years of the previous Parliament. He should read his

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own words; I think that he even said that public services had deteriorated. The new deal, whose funding his party voted against, has been responsible for the improvement of school after school in my constituency, but that would never have happened if his party had had its way.

The right hon. Gentleman lectured us about the proportion of the vote that our party polled in the general election. Like him, I lament and regret the reduction in the turnout, but the fact is that his party received its lowest number of votes since 1983—18 years ago. The proportion of votes cast for his party was lower than that cast for it under Jeremy Thorpe in February 1974. The only reason that his party has more seats now than the number achieved by Jeremy Thorpe with a higher proportion of the vote is the voting system, which it derides and very much dislikes, together with the unrequited tactical votes bestowed upon it by Labour voters who, for reasons that escape me, dislike it less than they dislike the Conservative party. [Interruption.] Is the right hon. Gentleman heckling? He was rude when my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) heckled. He must keep better order if he is going to lecture us on how to behave.

On Monday, I celebrated the 31st anniversary of my election to the House of Commons. I am now subject to the conjugated verb, "I am a senior Member, you are a veteran, he is clapped out." I want to pass on to the Opposition and the Government Front Bench my reflections on what I have learned in different phases of those years. I say to the Conservative party that a member of the current shadow Cabinet asked me early on in the previous Parliament, while we were part of an overseas delegation, what the Conservative party had to do to regain its place in the electorate's esteem. I said that it had to decide what it was for, but what we heard in the general election was only what it was against. That was why the electorate rejected it so decisively.

The Conservative party must understand that it is one thing to be rejected as a Government, as it was in 1997, but another to be rejected as an Opposition by a similar majority. That is a serious development in its history. The electorate saw the Conservatives only as being against things such as foreigners and asylum seekers, which was their code for race. One reason why the ethnic minorities in my constituency gave more active support to the Labour party than they even gave before was because they saw the Conservatives as an enemy who spoke about them, not to them. I welcomed the fact that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) moved away from such talk today.

A political party that tries to get votes from the gutter will discover that not enough of the electorate are prepared to get into the gutter with it. The electorate were better than the Conservatives thought, which is one reason why they were so decisively defeated a few days ago. They need to learn that lesson; my party failed to learn it for a long time. What baffles me is that the Conservatives saw what happened to the Labour party in that terrible decade of the 1980s. They know what members of the Labour party did to each other and how disconnected we were from the electorate, but they have learned nothing from that appalling experience. We were carried through by the courage of, first, Neil Kinnock, then John Smith and, finally, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

It is not enough to elect a personality as party leader. The Conservatives have to assess how to re-relate themselves, not in terms of jargon about inclusiveness, but to the mass of the electorate within society. Otherwise, they are in for a long period of opposition. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister knows, I say that as one who rightly forecast a similar majority in this general election as I forecasted for the previous one. However, I did not bet on that and am a poorer man for it.

I turn now to my right hon. and hon. Friends. It took the Labour party a long time to learn where we went wrong from 1979 onwards. Now that we have learned that lesson, I hope that it is learned for good. When a Government have a very large majority, as this one have, there can be a temptation for Government Members to believe that they can let fly and behave as an unofficial Opposition—and looking at the Opposition, that might be very tempting.

One of the most important things that we ought to have learned during our long period in opposition is what loyalty is all about. Ken Livingstone—now happily no longer a Member of this place—used to believe that loyalty was supporting people only when one agreed with them, but Lord Melbourne summed up what loyalty is really about. When somebody said to him,

"I will support you as long as you are in the right",

he replied:

"What I want is men who will support me when I am in the wrong."

I am not saying for one instant that a form of sycophancy that I have pursued fairly consistently should be the theme of the entire party—

David Winnick (Walsall, North): I hope not.

Mr. Kaufman: Now, David, you shut up.

We have to look at what happened when large numbers of the party's members decided that they knew better than not only the party leadership but the electorate.

Towards the end of the last Parliament, there were a considerable number of panegyrics, in which I did not feel able to join, for Mr. Wedgwood Benn, who tried to turn the Labour party into a Stalinist party, not believing that the electorate had any voice in what the Labour party should become. Having played a very large part in keeping us out of office for 18 years, Mr. Benn's final gift to the Labour party was to hand over to the Liberal Democrats a seat that my friend Eric Varley used to win by 18,000.

Not long ago, I got an unsolicited letter from a stranger that said, "Dear Mr. Kaufman, I saw you on television the other night. I know that if something horrible comes on television, you can turn it off, but you came on too quickly." In the case of Mr. Wedgwood Benn I am quicker off the mark with my remote control, so I did not hear what was reported to me—namely, that he said that Chesterfield was lost because it was an old Labour seat. It strikes me as very strange that old Labour voters should demonstrate that they are old Labour by electing a Liberal Democrat, although the Liberal Democrats are of course now the tax and spend party. Perhaps that is what he meant.

Loyalty and cohesion are essential for our party, but that does not mean unquestioning adherence to whatever Ministers put forward. There were occasions in the last

Parliament when some of my hon. Friends felt it necessary to disagree with the Government, and I am sure that there will be such occasions in this Parliament, perhaps involving substantial numbers of colleagues. That may be appropriate in certain circumstances because no Government, especially one with a majority of this size, must feel that they can do whatever they like without responding to Parliament and, in particular, to their loyal supporters. I hope that all Labour Members can get together to make sure that the Government understand what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister meant when he said the day after the election that he was under an instruction to deliver.

Many good things have happened in each of our constituencies since the 1997 general election. My constituents have been liberated from the scourge of mass unemployment, particularly youth unemployment. Because we have a national minimum wage, the choice in my constituency is no longer between unemployment and poverty pay. Those are huge achievements by our Government.

I have already described what has happened in education. There have been very beneficial consequences from the phasing out of the assisted places scheme. Three schools in my constituency offered assisted places, from which 90-odd boys and girls living in my constituency benefited. Now, instead, 14,000 children in the state schools in my constituency benefit from the £2 million that went to them.

I say to my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench that money and the will, important though they are, are by no means sufficient to deliver the services that the Government and their supporters want—and that our constituents certainly voted for. One thing that must be done is to crack open the stranglehold of inefficient low-level bureaucracy that holds back the changes that we want and that the Government are investing in.

There is no excuse for the local health authority closing down the clinic for epileptics at Manchester royal infirmary, leaving some epileptics to travel miles for treatment and others with no choice at all. It is unacceptable that, owing to a reorganisation, the local health authority did not replace the Macmillan nurse, and people suffering from terminal cancer have not received the treatment that they wanted. The reason for that was not lack of will or finance from the Government, but a sheer shambles of insensitive failure to administer properly at local level. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and his colleagues must tackle that level, among others, if we are to deliver what our constituents want and voted for.

I am very happy that our Government have been returned, and with such a large majority. That gives them great scope to do all the things that our constituents want them to do. Since the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks referred to it, I include in that a ban on hunting with dogs. I hope that if this House of Commons votes for a complete ban, the Government will force that through the House of Lords under the Parliament Acts.

Although hunting with dogs is an emotional and significant matter, as the Government have said, and as we certainly believe, what we want is the delivery of good health and education services, better housing, more and better paid jobs and the freeing of people from the fear of crime on the streets. Antisocial behaviour orders are

beginning to work in Manchester to that end. I look to my right hon. and hon. Friends to deliver that. If they do so, I shall win the bet that I made last night with Bruce Anderson that Labour will win the next general election by an even larger majority.

4.38 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I have placed in the Register of Members' Interests the interests that I should declare.

The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) made practically no reference to the Gracious Speech. I understand why he overlooked it. Even after the four years that the Government have had to consider what might need doing to tackle the country's problems, Her Majesty was not given a very ample speech to read from the throne.

Returning to the House at the start of this new Parliament is a little like turning up on groundhog day. Four years on, and after four weeks of hectic electioneering, the party balance is almost identical to that which we faced in 1997. A Labour Government with a large majority are telling us that the state of hospitals and schools is poor, that something ought to be done about it, and that they might get round to tackling those issues. Did we not hear all that four years ago? After four years of government, are they not mainly responsible for the state of our schools and hospitals? Would not a little more humility on the part of those who had to struggle and scrape for every vote that they garnered have been a good idea?

Before Labour Members spring up to say that the Conservatives did not do well on 7 June, let me say that I fully accept that; of course we did not do well. We are heeding and learning from that experience, and in the next few days and weeks we shall have an interesting contest in which new ideas are set out and we choose the new leader we think we need. However, all Members should express a little humility about the fact that 41 per cent. of the electorate decided that it was not worth voting for any party or any candidate, and that for the first time in living memory a Government have a majority with positive support from only one quarter of voters—a massive 16 percentage points less than the proportion of voters who abstained altogether.

Collectively, we have a serious problem. The audience is leaving the political theatre, walking away from the offerings of all the main political parties. Almost every candidate and Member of Parliament who is honest will admit that, in the four weeks preceding 7 June, they had to struggle to retain the votes of those who had supported their party in previous elections. Labour's vote was almost 3 million down on the number of votes it achieved in 1997, which, in turn, was less than the number achieved in 1992 by John Major, the former right hon. Member for Huntingdon, who was then Prime Minister. He got rather more votes, but a rather smaller majority, than Labour achieved in 1997.

The Queen's Speech should address the issues and the style of politics that have caused people to walk away from the offerings of all the major national political parties and that have, through that massive abstention, hollowed out the democratic consent that upholds all Members of Parliament. On the doorsteps in my constituency and in others, whether represented now by a

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Member from my party or from another, I encountered a growing dislike for politics based on spin and highly centralised message making. Many people told me that the offerings of central spin machines—an idea probably modelled on that of the Labour party, but not uniquely—were deeply distrusted.

If a group of politicians constantly parrot the same refrain week after week, month after month, with no differentiation, no dialogue, no progress and no understanding of the fact that the public do not always agree with them, the public, instead of being impressed by that, say, "We simply don't believe you. We would like to see more genuine debate and greater nuance. We want you to understand that everything is not perfect, and to evince some recognition of the fact that mistakes have been made by Governments of all persuasions. We would like you to understand our concerns and problems." I think that that means that we have to forge a new style of politics based on campaigning around the local and national aspirations of individuals and communities, which we, as their representatives, can pick up.

We have to be keener to hold the Executive to account, whether we are Opposition Members or Government Back Benchers. Many of the Labour Members of Parliament elected or re-elected to this Parliament will not sit on the Treasury Bench, but they all have a duty, with Opposition Members, to hold the Government to account—to remind the Government of what their electorates want and to tell the Government why they are failing—[Interruption.] The Minister of State, Scotland Office keeps scoffing. He is not seriously interested in the problems of this country or the electorate. He obviously did not knock on enough doors during the general election to understand the problem that affects his party, mine and the others represented in Parliament. The audience is walking away in droves.

During the general election campaign, many people in Labour constituencies as well as Conservative ones did not want to come to the door and talk at all if they thought a canvasser was outside. They stayed indoors because the television soap was more interesting. [HON. MEMBERS: "That is what happened to you."] I am talking not about my experience, but about that reported by canvassers operating in a wide range of constituencies, both those in which there was a chance that the seat would change hands and those in which there was none.

Labour Members are deluding themselves if they do not understand that 3 million people staying at home sends a serious message to them as well as to us. There are some common elements in the problem we face. If Labour Members do not understand that centralised spin machines churning out messages that people do not believe is a turn-off, they had better think again, because their actions are helping to destroy belief and trust in Parliament and politics. If they believe that a Government repeating that schools are getting better will solve the problem, when people want a Government who engage in the detail of why local school standards are not rising, why the money is not getting through to teachers, why teachers are not being recruited, and why a circular a day does not motivate a teacher more strongly, but turns him or her off, they have not got the message of the general election.

It was quite breathtaking to hear in the talismanic remarks at the end of the comments of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton the statement that the Government must do something about all those bureaucracies. Many of them were set up over many years by Labour councils, or have recently been set up and strengthened by the Labour Government, who were extremely good at appointing officials, bureaucrats and spin doctors, but very bad at appointing real doctors and real teachers and giving them the power and the tools that they would need to do the job.

We are promised in the Gracious Speech that there will be an

"Education Bill . . . to promote diversity and higher standards, particularly in secondary schools."

I am delighted that the sinner has repented. However, in the previous Parliament the Government introduced legislation to try to ensure that people whose children did not go to grammar schools could vote the local grammar school out of existence. They spent some time campaigning for that in Yorkshire—and I am delighted to say that they failed. They did not understand that not everyone is jealous. There are those who like to know that bright children from whatever background can go to a good school. When the Government were defeated, they limped off and did not really try that again.

I am glad that the Government have changed their mind, but we cannot welcome that as a sign that they will now give us a better education system. We shall not be able to do so until we know that they will repeal the legislation that still threatens grammar schools, as proof that they now genuinely understand that diversity and choice are the way to achieve higher standards.

When will the Secretary of State for Education and Skills come before us to repent of all the mistakes of her predecessor, who sent out virtually a circular a day, to the point where teachers in schools in my constituency were saying, "We can't take any more circulars. We are spending too much time reading them and not enough time is left to teach. We are spending too much time completing ridiculous corporate plans, and we don't have time for the extra-curricular activities, such as sports and the setting up of clubs, that children need if they are to have a more rounded education." I guess that that has happened in most other Members' local schools, too.

Too many teachers are saying, "I didn't come into teaching to write corporate plans, read Government circulars and do the Government's work in responding to the surveys that they wish to be completed." Teachers came into teaching to teach, and they are discovering that a meddlesome and interventionist Government are getting in their way when they try to do so.

Instead of promising vague pieces of legislation, when will the Government sort out the issue of teachers' pay? In my part of the world, and in the constituencies of many of my right hon. and hon. Friends, it is difficult to recruit and retain teachers with current national pay scales. The problem has become considerably worse over the past four years. There has been some good growth in competing private sector wages, and many younger people are saying, "I have a degree and I have prospects. I could get £5,000 a year more with shorter hours or easier conditions if I took a private sector job and didn't go into a state-run school."

Worse still, people train and become state school teachers, and after two or three years say, "I can't stand the circulars, the atmosphere or the fact that the

Government don't allow me to assert proper discipline in the school. I don't like the rates of pay and I don't like the whole package. I'm going to leave." All their training is written off and the Government have to spend even more taxpayers' money to train new people, who may go through exactly the same process of discovery. They will not be retained for long, and even more Government money will be wasted.

I urge the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, as she plans an education Bill, to welcome diversity and higher standards and to understand that those will be more quickly brought about by sorting out teachers' pay in areas of scarcity and shortage, both by subject and geographically. The issue would be more quickly sorted out by rapid repeal or withdrawal of many of the proposals and documents that were hurled at the education sector, and which it received all too unwillingly, over the past four years by the Secretary of State's predecessor.

It is interesting that her predecessor has been given promotion for what he did in his previous office. I hope that he is not planning to do to the police what he so clearly did to the education system, thereby damaging the morale of, and the incentives for, all those who are most important in delivering the service.

We were told in the Gracious Speech that we would get "new opportunities for school sponsorship"

and

"more options for tackling failing schools".

We need to know a little more about those ideas of more sponsorship. We hope that, given the large sums of money raised from us as taxpayers, with the huge tax increases of the last Parliament behind us, this Parliament might vote us enough money to be able to afford the teachers, head teachers and equipment that we need in our schools, without their having to devote a lot of their energy to getting private sector sponsorship.

I am all in favour of parents and voluntary bodies raising additional money for schools—that is easier in richer areas than poorer ones—and many of them do it willingly. However, I hope that a great deal of senior teacher time will not be diverted into scrambling around for industrial and commercial sponsorship, when schools should get reliable sources of money to pay teachers' salaries and buy the books and equipment that they need from the substantial sums that are collected from taxpayers and that, undoubtedly, are voted for in the general education budget.

I recommend to the Government the Conservative policy that was proposed in the election. It was a well-kept secret because the media decided to concentrate on other issues, but it was the good policy of routing much more money for pupils—£540 more on average for each pupil—directly into schools. We believe that the head teacher and the board of governors are better able to judge the range and value of services that they need, and could use for educational purposes some of the money currently being spent on services, bureaucracy and administration.

The Queen's Speech states that the Government

"will introduce legislation to reform health services. A Bill will decentralise power and direct resources to National Health Service staff, give patients greater influence on the running of the NHS, and strengthen regulation of the health professions."

Does that come from the same group of Ministers who wish to scrap the community health councils, which are a way of giving patients and the general community some

influence on the running of the NHS? I thought that the Labour Government disagreed with CHCs and wanted to abolish them. How will they implement their proposal? Shall we not have a dearer and more complex bureaucracy that gives even less power and influence to those who may wish to spend their time in that way?

How will power be decentralised? I should be delighted if my local hospital had more power to make its own decisions, compared with the organisation of the local bureaucracy, but I should also like it to have more of the money that we vote for health service purposes generally. I must tell the Government that, in the fast-growing area of the Thames valley, the money going to Royal Berkshire hospital is simply not adequate for the large number of people who wish to use its services. The hospital is currently a building site—which, I trust, means that there will be good news when the building is completed. However, we still do not have the money that is needed for extra nurses, consultants and beds.

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. George Foulkes) indicated dissent.

Mr. Redwood: The hon. Gentleman is shaking his head again, but he should know that the reorganisation plans that the Labour Government have put through are reducing the number of beds in a fast-growing area of the country. I am the first to admit that there were not enough beds under the outgoing Conservative Administration in 1997, but since we left office, the number of people needing the service has gone up and the Labour Government have decided to reduce the number of beds. How can that possibly make sense? How can we welcome the new Government on this auspicious day if, although they say that they are dedicated to the message that public services must get better, in my local area I face the conundrum that there are not enough staff, nurses, consultants or beds, yet Labour plans allow no increases to meet the extra demand? I hope that Ministers will look at that problem again and will think again.

Throughout the country, there are still plans to reduce the number of hospitals. Why do the Government have it in for the smaller hospital? What is wrong with the cottage hospital or the small hospital that does not qualify for full district general status? Why can it not be given a right to life? Have the Government not understood that in this extraordinary election, when many people felt that we were all disconnected from what they wanted, a by-election was held in Wyre Forest? That is what it looked like; people came out in droves to vote out of office a Labour MP who was also a junior Minister, and elect someone who had never been a politician and probably had not intended to be one—he simply wanted to save his local hospital. Does that not tell the Government something about the mood in the country, and does it not show that we need to take seriously the message from the electorate that they do not feel that the Government are engaging with their concerns and worries?

Perhaps the biggest failure of the previous four years of public service delivery, which has come across loud and clear to me on the doorsteps of Wokingham during the past four years, not just the past four weeks, was in transport. The Government swept to office saying that car drivers were wicked, that people really should not use their cars very much or at all and that we needed to understand that we had to switch to buses and trains on a

[Mr. Redwood]

large scale. They said that they would reduce the amount of traffic using the roads—the number of car journeys—by following a restrictive policy towards the motorist and an expansive policy towards public transport.

My electors said to me, and I agreed with them, that during the past four years they had observed no improvements in public transport facilities. I was able to tell them that part of the problem was that investment in many of the public transport facilities had fallen during the past four years. The other part of the problem was the extraordinary hostility of the Deputy Prime Minister, then the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, to any private enterprise business involved in transport that might want to take some action to improve transport facilities.

The Government were undoubtedly able, with the help of Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors, to restrict the use of the car. All sorts of chicanes, bollards, obstacles, speed humps and other devices were introduced. Roads were blocked off, access to stations was made more difficult and other unhelpful impediments were placed in our way. I am all in favour of safety measures near schools and in residential roads, but many of those obstacles were placed on main routes where there was no such strong case in favour. The Government tried that part of the strategy, but it did not reduce the number of car journeys, because there was no alternative.

I suggest that Ministers try doing the weekly shop on a bike or on the bus. I suggest that Ministers try walking their children to primary schools, or to secondary schools if they still need help to get there, rather than taking them by car. I suggest that Ministers see how easy it is for the disabled, or those carrying heavy loads, or those who have to carry tools and equipment for their daily work, to travel by bike, by train, by bus or on foot. For many people it simply is not practical. It is not that we want to wreck the planet. I will use the bus or the train wherever it makes sense, wherever it can be timely, wherever it is a good alternative, but in many cases there is simply not a good alternative.

Norman Baker (Lewes): I agree with the right hon. Gentleman's criticism of the previous Government and this Government for failing to invest in public transport, but does he believe that the Conservative party's proposal to cut petrol prices by 6p a litre would help to reduce congestion?

Mr. Redwood: The proposal would have a fairly neutral effect on congestion. It would be a good relief for those making essential car journeys who are being taxed over the top for the privilege. We have a rip-off Government, who dare to blame the petrol companies when it is the Government who are the main beneficiaries and the main raiders at the pumps. Most journeys are not voluntary. We have seen that because, with the huge petrol price increase, there has been no diminution in the use of the motor car. There has been no move from the car to the bus or the train, because people are unable to make such a switch.

I am delighted that the Liberal Democrats are still wedded to the deeply unpopular rip-offs at the pump. The mood of the country is very much in favour of giving the

motorist a bit of a better break. So little of the money collected from the motorist is spent on alternative public transport or on roads. People might feel a little better about it if they thought that transport was benefiting from that huge raid on their pockets and purses, but unfortunately it is not.

Mr. Bercow: May I reinforce what my right hon. Friend has just said? Does he agree that quite the most damning indictment of the Government is the fact that pre-tax we have the cheapest petrol in Europe, but post-tax ours is without doubt the most expensive?

Mr. Redwood: My hon. Friend makes his point excellently, as always. He has proved that it is not the rip-off oil companies but a rip-off Government who have done the damage.

The public are prepared to use buses and trains more if they can get to the bus stop or the station, if they can park, if it makes economic sense and if it is timely, but for too many journeys that is not practical or timely. The Government need to put much more effort into promoting better public transport and creating the conditions in which the private sector can get on and do the job.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Will the right hon. Gentleman remind the House of the success of the Government of which he was a part in running down rural bus services by deregulation and the withdrawal of investment support?

Mr. Redwood: I do not see it quite like that. Deregulation produced a big increase in bus services in a number of important areas. For example, it certainly led to a large increase in the number of park-and-ride buses in Oxford city, to the extent that people eventually said that there were too many buses. That experiment was successful, but in rural areas my party and I favour flexible bus services, including more dial-a-ride services. Such services should bring together existing publicly subsidised transport so that more people without cars can have access to a more flexible service. In rural areas it will not be feasible to run hourly or half-hourly bus services to places that only a few people want to go to, so we need to be a little cleverer in thinking about how to meet the needs of a minority without cars, and allow those with cars to use them, as the car is the best way of getting around in rural conditions.

The Government's great boast, which was repeated in the Prime Minister's speech, is that they have run the economy wonderfully and banished the trade cycle. If only that were true. Again, they should be a little more humble than they currently seem on the basis of the support of a quarter of the electorate. This is the Government who have created a phenomenal boom and bust in the telecommunications, high-tech and computing industries, which is very serious for the British economy.

Most people now believe that economies will succeed in this decade as they did in the previous one—through the lead growth provided by high-tech activities involving new computers, internet links, new telephone links, mobile telephony and all the wonderful devices that have been developed in recent years. However, what did the Government do about that? Instead of deregulating, and encouraging and producing more competitive conditions

so that we could catch up with the United States of America, they embarked upon clumsy regulation, followed by a massive stealth tax in the form of their large auction licence fee. If they take £22 billion out of the lead sector almost in one go, they will create a crisis, and if the German Government follow up and take out even more, the crisis will be made Europe wide. That is exactly what the Government have done, and they still do not seem to understand the seriousness of their actions.

I want Britain to be one of the strongest economies in the world. I want it to continue to grow as it did under the Conservatives for most of our time in government, and during a part of the Labour Government's first term. Instead, however, the Government are heaping more and more sandbags on the British economy. They have started by deliberately creating a bust in telecommunications and computing, which form the colossal lead sector. Before Ministers and others look even more sceptical, they should consider what has happened to British Telecom's balance sheet and share price. They should also consider what has happened to the entire telecommunications sector and to all those internet start-ups. The Government's refusal to cut the tax burden—they have instead insisted on raising it—or to deregulate and create competitive conditions has caused very serious problems.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston): Does not the right hon. Gentleman accept that the fall in the share prices of many of the telecommunications and high-tech companies is due to falling profit figures in the United States and a lack of confidence in the sector as a whole? Those reductions were not caused by the sale of third generation licences, which occurred because band width is a limited resource that should not be given away free.

Mr. Redwood: No, I do not agree with that view. British Telecom makes practically no profit in the United States of America and is largely a UK profit-derived operation. It is the pressure on that profit and the huge borrowings that the company has had to make to pay for licences that has caused the damage to our lead company in the sector. Ask the companies; they will explain that the sums that they had to borrow were extremely large, especially at the very time when they needed huge amounts to invest in future technology, including the broad band revolution that the Government want them to introduce, the internet revolution sought by the education establishment and the mobile phone revolution that the public are keen for companies to carry out. It was the height of folly to take that money away.

There has been similar insistence on creating boom and bust in rural areas, which was first evident in a little flurry at the beginning of the Government's time in office. An obvious bust occurred in rural areas, led by their bad handling of common agricultural policy and common fisheries policy negotiations. That was followed by their lamentable performance on foot and mouth, when they did too much too late and caused terrible carnage in associated rural industries, in addition to causing terrible damage to our livestock. They were responsible for all sorts of beastly scenes that we had to witness on our televisions as they mishandled that crisis.

The message from the electorate is very sombre for those of us who believe passionately in parliamentary democracy. Too many people out there do not believe in very much of what is said and done in this House and by

this Government. Too many people believed that the Labour Government would at least improve their schools and hospitals. They feel deeply let down.

The challenge for my party is to devise, with our new leader, ideas for persuading people that we will give them better schools and hospitals, provide a choice, allow them to spend their private money when that makes sense and guarantee access to the good, free care that they need, but do not get under the Labour Government, when that is important. Of course, we need to provide a better answer for the difficulties of getting around the country, and tackle the problems in the economy that the Government have made worse.

The Government do not say that they want more regulation, more tax and more boom and bust, but that is what they have provided in the telecommunications industry and the rural economy. The Government are on probation; they are not about to experience their coronation. It would be wrong of them to believe that because we may be small in number, we lack stomach for the fight. We have much to do in drawing attention to the extent to which they are out of touch. The public are angry about the state of their services and they wish their money to be considerably better spent.

5.5 pm

Mr. Peter Mandelson (Hartlepool): Chief among the many penetrating and acerbic insights that my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) offered was his observation that, during the general election campaign, the Conservative party comprehensively failed to set out clearly what it stands for. After listening to the rather long application of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) for readmission to the shadow Cabinet, we are none the wiser. I shall not weep too many crocodile tears about that, although I believe that a good Government need a half decent party to oppose them. On the basis of this afternoon's performance, I fear that that will take some years.

I shall concentrate on Northern Ireland and the part of the Queen's Speech that refers to it. First, I want to express my strong support for the measures in the Queen's Speech. Measures to boost school standards, especially in secondary schools, to reform health services and to strengthen the fight against crime will be particularly welcomed by my constituents. People in Hartlepool did not sit by their television sets and fail to come to the front door during the election campaign. They came with open arms to find out what the Labour Government would do in the next four years. I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Wokingham had such a disappointing experience; he should have come to Hartlepool.

I also welcome the measures for enterprise, not least because they bear more than a passing resemblance to those that I tried to promote when I was Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in 1998. I am glad that the Government now propose to implement them. However, I want to make a further point about the information revolution. Away from popular concerns and the measures in the Gracious Speech, I am worried that the Government propose to publish only a draft Bill to create the much-needed order, clarity and support that the rapidly changing and growing media and communications industries need.

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Big issues are at stake for the United Kingdom's economy and culture in the convergence of the technologies. We need to improve broad band roll-out and increase the take-up of digital television to increase access to information services. The Government need quickly to make clear what exactly they will do to help the United Kingdom to sustain or regain its lead in those industries. In that fast-changing world, it may be preferable to wait and get legislation absolutely right rather than introduce a Bill that is faulty or in danger of being rapidly overtaken by technological developments and thus quickly become out of date.

There are five existing regulators in those industries. If the Government are proposing, as has been suggested in some quarters, to create a shadow office of communications, a shadow Ofcom—which would be a shadow strategic body with no teeth—to take over the powers of the existing regulators, my fear is that those regulators would be emasculated without being put out of existence, and without the real problems effectively being gripped. If there are any lessons to be learned from the rail industry, its shadow Strategic Rail Authority—and even its Strategic Rail Authority—should be sufficient warning for us.

I come now to Northern Ireland. Without any doubt, the peace process is in a very serious condition, although not, in my view, a hopeless one. Its condition has been highlighted most notably by the resignation offer made by Northern Ireland's First Minister. His offer to resign at the beginning of July is as regrettable as it is probably inevitable in the circumstances. Seemingly irreconcilable pressures abound in the peace process at the moment, but in my judgment there is a way through, and I shall refer to that presently.

There is no doubt about what is at the heart of the present crisis in the peace process. It is that the Unionists are irretrievably hooked on their demand for a start to decommissioning by the republicans of their arms, and that the republicans are using that demand for decommissioning effectively to hold the peace process to ransom, to get their way on everything else that is of concern to them. That includes issues of security normalisation, or demilitarisation as they would call it in Northern Ireland; the amnesty that the republicans want for former terrorists who are fugitives from justice or from imprisonment; and the reform of policing, only six or seven months after the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 received its Royal Assent.

We have finally reached the impasse on arms decommissioning that everyone has seen coming for a very long time—indeed, probably since the early days of the Belfast agreement. Many of us have tried repeatedly to head off this impasse, using different permutations and formulations in relation to arms decommissioning. One of the first things that I did when I went to Northern Ireland was to join Senator Mitchell in his review. We produced a way forward on decommissioning from that; we then produced another permutation to head off the threatened collapse of the new Government and institutions early in 2000; we then came forward with another formulation after the suspension had taken place, and we came back with a further permutation in the talks that gave rise to the Hillsborough agreement in May last year.

Frankly, I think that we have run out of ways of postponing the issue of decommissioning, of parking it, of sidetracking it or of disguising it. It is sitting there, right in the middle of the road, and there is no way of getting round it. It is going to have to be addressed. Some people say—they argue this with me and I am sure that those voices are being raised now—that we should simply ignore the issue of arms in Northern Ireland. They suggest that we forget about decommissioning and find another road. After all, if the ceasefire is holding, which by and large it is, and if the peace in Northern Ireland is secure, which by and large it is, if arms are not in the main actually being used, why make such a fuss about them? Why not just let them lie there?

That is a tempting thought, but also a profoundly wrong thought. We stand no chance of stabilising democracy in Northern Ireland while armed paramilitary organisations are running around threatening to second guess the democratically elected politicians so that they can then take over and start calling the shots again. We simply cannot live and flourish as a democracy and a decent civic society in Northern Ireland in those circumstances.

It is true that decommissioning did not have the same status as the other heads of the Good Friday agreement. None the less, decommissioning was accepted by all the parties—all the signatories—as an essential part of the peace process. Sinn Féin remains committed to making its best efforts to bring about decommissioning by the Provisional IRA. The IRA itself has said that it will engage properly with General de Chastelain's decommissioning body, but has so far failed to do so. If the Northern Ireland peace process depends on anything, it depends on everyone living up to their word. It is when people step back or fall short that confidence fails and trouble ensues.

My second point about decommissioning is that every party—every shade of political opinion—was represented properly and fairly in the devolved Government in Northern Ireland. It was the first time that that had happened since Northern Ireland was created. That was predicated on a belief that democracy could take over because the war was over. That has never been said in so many words. The IRA has never said that the war is over—it has nearly said it; it has sort of said it; it has been implored and encouraged to say it; but it has never actually said it. If it is too difficult to say—if the words are too difficult to express—it is essential in Northern Ireland to rely on actions rather than words. The actions that demonstrate that the war is over must include a preparedness to put arms permanently beyond use.

The Provisional IRA is, after all, an army that continues to be organised: recruited, supplied and disciplined. For all I know, it continues to set targets—I do not know enough about the Provisional IRA to say. That being so, it is difficult to stand by as that army continues in existence. It would be easier to live with it if there were tangible signs of those arms being put beyond use in a way, within the existing legislation, that would persuade people—even if it cannot be said—that the war is, indeed, over.

Furthermore, like everything else about the peace process, decommissioning is important because it is about building up mutual confidence among people who are sectarian and who, after decades of strife, have an enormous amount on which not to trust each other. Therefore, confidence-building measures have an

enormous premium in Northern Ireland. Opening certain of its arms dumps to international inspection was a major confidence-building measure by the Provisional IRA. I do not think that it would now be a huge step for it to make those dumps that have been opened to inspection and reinspection by the two international inspectors permanently inaccessible. People have speculated that the IRA might do so and I certainly would not discount such a move. It would be a significant step to all reasonably minded people if the Provisional IRA did so. It would be the start of the decommissioning process for which everyone has been waiting and which the peace process so desperately needs. Indeed, it would do an enormous amount to help to restore confidence and trust.

What else is needed in Northern Ireland to rebuild the trust that has faltered in recent months? The republican movement is under a clear obligation to make the start in decommissioning that I have described. None the less, the movement is entitled to expect others to continue to help to create the best context in which it can make that start in actual decommissioning. After all, trust is not simply a two-way street in Northern Ireland—it is multi-directional and has to come and go from all quarters in all directions to be effective.

The British Government have a particular role and responsibility to inject trust into the peace process from their direction in relation to known republican concerns. Those include security normalisation—lowering the profile and dealing with the bases and military installations that are still present in Northern Ireland. That means tackling the problem of on-the-run, or OTRs, who are the people who have become fugitives from justice or have escaped from prison some time in the past 20 or 30 years—I do not know how long—and are in an anomalous position given the early prisoner release scheme that has been operating under the Good Friday agreement.

Republican concerns also relate to police and criminal justice reforms. In May last year at the Hillsborough talks, when we put the inclusive, all-party, devolved Government in Northern Ireland back on the road following the three-month suspension, the British Government committed themselves to taking steps in all those areas by now—by June, this year. The Government have done so faithfully and conscientiously. It is worth pointing out that if the Government had waited for the republican movement to make a start on arms decommissioning so that progress was made in implementing the Good Friday agreement across the board, we would not have made a start on anything. We did not wait—we acted and we went ahead in the belief and expectation that a start with arms decommissioning would be made following a serious engagement not only by the Provisional IRA, but by other paramilitary organisations, with the de Chastelain commission.

We are in June, the criminal justice reforms are going ahead and security normalisation in Northern Ireland has made sustained progress throughout the past 12 months—not merely sustained, but quite dramatic progress in many parts of Northern Ireland. Within the constraints of the existing law, the Government have shown considerable flexibility in their treatment of OTRs—former terrorists who are fugitives from justice. In relation to the reform of policing, the Patten recommendations have been implemented in full, except for minor practical modifications.

In other words, the Government have kept their side of the bargain during the past year, but they have done so and made serious progress in ways that have been sensitive and designed to maintain the confidence by and large of all sections of the community in Northern Ireland. The Government have struck a balance that has provided a proper and adequate context for the republican movement to move, without ultimately sacrificing the good will of the Unionists or the effectiveness of the security forces.

Many Unionists have been concerned, troubled, sometimes angry and occasionally despairing about what has been done in the name of the Good Friday agreement and in the cause of the peace process during the past year, but I believe that the Government have acted in a way that will ultimately secure the good will of the mainstream body of Unionist opinion in Northern Ireland. That is an absolutely essential condition and compass that the Government have to maintain in the coming weeks of negotiation.

There will be no peace process in Northern Ireland that tries to hop ahead on one foot alone. Both sides of the sectarian divide need to buy into, have to be tied into, and have to have a stake in whatever the British Government do if the peace process is not to falter. One cannot proceed with the support of one side alone. We need the good will of all, across the community.

It is against that background that I believe that in relation to security normalisation there is more that the Government can and should consider doing. It is a matter for the professional judgment of the Government security experts at the end of the day. The considered and informed view of the Chief Constable, and the General Officer Commanding in support, must be respected by the Government.

At the beginning of this year, we concluded that it was possible safely to go somewhat further in relation to normalisation, including in that most difficult area of South Armagh. Nothing has happened since January, since I was in office, to my knowledge, to alter the conclusion that we can safely go somewhat further, on the advice of the Chief Constable.

On OTRs, existing legislation might not afford sufficient flexibility to move forward. The existing framework of law might not provide the scope that the Government need to deal with the range of cases that the past 20 or 30 years have thrown up. If that is the case, it would be timely for Parliament to consider appropriate changes in the law to address the thorny question of former terrorists still on the run.

In relation to police reform, however, I have a cautious view. I, probably more than anyone else, was responsible for the legislation. I am acutely aware of the criticisms that were made of it, but people need to bear in mind the fact that the final form of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 had been extensively amended to meet republican and nationalist concerns. As finally enacted, the measure was different in many respects from the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill originally introduced in the House. However, we cannot proceed simply on the basis of trying to satisfy one side alone; we have to carry mainstream Unionist opinion, as well as the police themselves, if the reforms are to be sustained in practice.

We may not have got everything exactly right in that legislation—however hard we tried. If so, the legislation can, and should be, reviewed in time, but it would be

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better to do that after we have seen how the new police service is able to work in practice, rather than before. At the end of the day, it is not by political correctness that the Police Service of Northern Ireland has to be judged, but by its operational effectiveness and efficiency. So much do we owe to the people of Northern Ireland that they must have a police service that is able to do its job in combating crime and paramilitary violence. I hope that that will continue to be the guiding thought of the Government during the weeks and months to come.

Let me end by saying that the recent election results in Northern Ireland were not wholly encouraging. The extremes have been favoured as a result of what happened. However, we are a long way from the moderate wipe-out that took place after Sunningdale in 1974. Let us bear that in mind before anyone sounds panic stations. Despite their differences and despite the rhetoric and the hyperbole to which we are treated, all the parties in Northern Ireland still have a stake and an interest in preventing collapse of the political institutions. In my view, that goes as much for Sinn Féin as for the Democratic Unionist party represented in the House this afternoon.

I say to those people who claim that they are acting for their principles, "Please do not let your principles get in the way of your interests." The collapse of politics—should it occur as a result of a breakdown in the negotiations and of a failure to agree a way forward—will help absolutely nobody in Northern Ireland in whatever part of the community spectrum they live. To be forced back to the threat of the gun and the prospect of violence on the scale and in the terms of yesteryear would leave everyone in Northern Ireland worse off. Some flexibility and accommodation are needed on all sides to ensure that that does not happen.

No one should assume that if any one side, any one party, or any single individual is pushed beyond breaking point by others' intransigence the process will remain intact, because it will not. It is near—but not at—a potential breaking point, which will happen if individuals are pushed beyond their forbearance and their ability to carry their constituencies in their part of the community. Therefore, an enormous amount is at stake at this 11th hour.

I strongly support the efforts of the British Government, the Irish Government and all the parties committed to the Good Friday agreement to find a way through, because surely, for all our sakes, that is exactly what they must do.

5.34 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): That was a powerful speech by the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson); it will repay careful study. On behalf of all my colleagues, I reiterate the commitment made by our party leader earlier in the debate—that we shall continue as a parliamentary group to support the efforts of Her Majesty's Government in trying to secure peace. I pay tribute to the role previously played by the right hon. Gentleman in the success that has been achieved, despite the fact that there are on-going worries, to which he alluded. I never really thought that he was a quitter, and it is reassuring to know that he is willing to contribute to debates in the House in the way that he has—long may it continue.

At the start of his speech, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool said that a Government, especially a Government with a majority of this scale, need effective opposition. I agree, and I hope that the Liberal Democrats will provide that effective opposition. It is not a weak position to be constructively critical. We shall encourage the Government to go further when we think that they have not gone far enough, and we shall criticise them if we think that they are going too far. That is a perfectly reasonable and rational way of practising politics, and it partly deals with the point made by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) who, instead of staying to listen to the rest of the debate, has busily returned to the doorsteps, trying without success to get people away from their television sets. However, that is his choice.

I believe that the electorate were rather taken in by the nightly messages that they received in the national media, which suggested that nothing was at stake in this general election. When I was campaigning, people told me on the doorstep that they believed their voting would change nothing, so they had decided early in the campaign not to do so. Of course, there were some issues about spin and the confrontational aspect of politics. I am certainly not saying that we should censor polls or in any way stymie the comments made during election campaigns, but we do have a real problem in terms of re-engaging with the electorate. I hope that this Parliament will not ignore that, and I intend to return to that point.

For me, disappointment runs right through the Queen's Speech. The speech reveals a poverty of ambition. Under our new leader, the Liberal Democrats will try to represent an interest in defending civil liberties, in dealing with the environment, on which the Government have been lacklustre, and in the question of Europe, on which the Government have also been timid.

The most important thing that I want to say, in this debate on the Queen's Speech at the very beginning of this Parliament, is that it was not at all adequate for the Prime Minister to deal with the agricultural situation only in a single last sentence in his introductory speech. Although I agreed with many of his other remarks, the signal that was sent about the priority that the Government are prepared to attach to the future of our rural communities augurs ill for the future.

Foot and mouth disease was a disaster for many communities. There were infected farms in my constituency, and the problem completely overshadowed the election. The Government were right to delay the election—it was eminently sensible to do so—but a shadow was cast and the local people in the rural and landward areas of my constituency were completely distracted by the direct effects on the farming communities but, equally, by the indirect effects on tourism and on other small and family businesses. When I was campaigning, many suggestions were made to me about how that problem could be remedied. I raised one with the Paymaster General—the idea of a business rural tax relief system, which would allow small amounts of cash for small self-employed and family businesses in rural areas, to give them some immediate cash flow to keep them alive.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that many industries in urban areas depend on the rural areas, are badly affected by foot and mouth and are at present barred from receiving help?

Mr. Kirkwood: I absolutely agree. I am focusing on my constituency experience, but I take the point that the Government will have to embrace the consequences in urban and rural economies throughout the United Kingdom. A new Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has just been established and I have a great deal of respect for its new Secretary of State. I hope that, early in this Parliament, she will give us some clear idea about what should happen next. I certainly reinforce the call, made by my party leader, that we must have a full-blown public inquiry because much concern, anxiety and fear and many conspiracy theories exist outside Parliament. Someone even suggested to me that the Government started the infection to try to reduce livestock subsidies.

Clearly, those suggestions are fantastical, but the perceptions are real for the people who have been dramatically hit by the disease. Giving them a chance to ask questions and receive answers may take time, but the infection's provenance, the way in which it was managed and the financial consequences must form a major part of Parliament's work for at least the next 18 months before we will be able to say that we are beginning to get on top of the long-term effects.

In addition, the new Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs should produce some coherent long-term stability plans for agriculture, especially the livestock sector. That involves reform of the common agricultural policy. The Government have been reasonably progressive in the past, but they have met resistance in Europe when promoting reform and a sensible way forward. It is absolutely essential that, early on, the Government should produce some serious plans that give people the confidence to continue in agriculture and small business in rural areas. That is a crucial issue in my constituency.

The single European currency was of great concern during the election campaign. There is a great deal of ignorance—I use the word in its best sense—among the electorate, but there is an appetite to learn. People are willing to try to apply their minds to what the single currency means for them, but no one is giving them information of any sort. A politically charged election campaign is perhaps not the most objective atmosphere in which to promote constructive debate.

I have always been a passionate European, but I am not daft; we do not want to enter the single currency at a silly exchange rate, for example. I believe that when it is time for my children to take responsibility for the country, there will be three big blocs—America, China and Europe—so the United Kingdom's future will be rather bleak if we are not an intrinsic part of the single currency.

The moment is now right for the Government seriously to promote a campaign that allows people to consider the options and make objective choices about what they think should happen to their currency. If that is not done in the next two years, people will draw their own conclusions, industry will start to go offshore and we will start to lose jobs. In constituencies such as mine, which is heavily reliant on exporting knitted garments, with high added

value, to other parts of the world and has been suffering from high exchange rates and difficulties in achieving export orders—not to mention the banana war and so on—the Government need to promote a sensible debate that will lead to a decision, one way or the other, in two years' time. So long as the debate is constructive, I am prepared to accept the result of the referendum at face value, and that will be the end of the matter, although I passionately hope that we can win the referendum.

I want to say a quick word in passing about the public-private provision argument that formed part of the Prime Minister's speech. I am seriously worried that the idea of public service is being denigrated. I meet professionals, schoolteachers and others in my constituency who were passionate servants of the public when I was elected in 1983. They had chosen that career, but they are now "hoddendoon", as my granny would say; they are completely subjugated by the bureaucratic administration with which they are forced to deal. Given some of the talk coming from the Government at high level—the Prime Minister's speech compounded this today—they believe that public service is no longer highly regarded. The excellent quality of our civil and public servants is a quintessential part of what we as a country have achieved. The worst thing that we can do is to send them signals that we intend to engage wholesale in the privatisation of big chunks of our public sector. They will leave in droves and the situation will worsen dramatically.

We need only think of the disastrous reform of the national insurance recording system—NIRS2—and the private sector's involvement, through the private finance initiative. The Horizon computer scheme with ICL was also a disaster. It, too, involved the PFI. In addition, my hon. Friends experienced catastrophic failures in public services when attempts were made to privatise housing benefit payments in some London boroughs. We should not think that private is all good and public is all bad. For heaven's sake, we must decentralise decision making and invest in the managers so that they are capable and equipped to do the job. We need to give them the money and let them get on with it. Central Government are too hung up on public service agreements, targets and outcomes. There is a prescriptive control freakery in central Government, and we need to deal with that urgently.

Mention was made in the Queen's Speech of a couple of specific measures for welfare reform. I listened carefully to the Prime Minister as he talked about encouraging people to take work. I am nervous about the long-term effects of taking sanctions against people who do not do the work they are supposed to. Some American states have sensitive waiver systems that allow people who are acting in good faith to continue not to work. However, the evidence in other parts of America is that they often become repressive systems. Had the Conservatives made similar suggestions a few years ago, Labour Back Benchers would have gone mad with anger and frustration. We must be careful about sanctions—some people will never survive in the labour market. I worry a great deal about the stigma attached to them when the adage "Work for those who can and support for those who cannot" is trotted out.

I have a particular concern about the pensioner credit proposal. It seems that people who are on housing and council tax benefits will not be able to take advantage of it. I cannot understand how it is possible to contrive such

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a scheme without making the credit a financial dead loss for those who are on housing benefit or full council tax benefit. Nor can I understand how it helps people whose residential care fees are paid in full by the state centrally. All that does is put more money into local government. There are now concerns about those welfare proposals.

I must mention parliamentary reform. I believe that this is our last chance to achieve it. I have been in the House since 1983 and attempts have been made, in good faith, to modernise this place and make it more in tune with what people expect of a modern Parliament. Hon. Members on both sides of the House visit sister European Parliaments and know how things are done there. Much of their work is carried out in parliamentary Committees. The *sine qua non* is to recover to the House the power to nominate the people who scrutinise. Without that, we are just playing at reform and will not be taken seriously.

Select Committees do good work and many people who serve on them work hard, but we will never get on top of the problem until the House has the courage to implement that change. It is up to Labour Back Benchers in particular, because they have the power to drive the change through. Indeed, it is in their interests to do so because many will serve on Select Committees and, if they give themselves the opportunity, will perform distinguished duties on them. The House of Commons will never respond to the modern requirements of a Parliament until its Members take control of the process of scrutinising the Executive. If we do not do that now, the clear and inevitable result will be that Parliament is diminished.

5.50 pm

Joyce Quin (Gateshead, East and Washington, West): I am pleased to be able to speak on the first day of the debate on the Queen's Speech. It is the first time that I have spoken as a Government Back Benchers, and it is somewhat daunting not to be provided with a mountain of comforting briefing, with lines to take and rebuttals of criticisms that might be made during my remarks. I very much welcome the opportunity to put a few comments on the record. I assure the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) that I am certainly one of those Back Benchers who is interested in further reform of our procedures and effective scrutiny of legislation in the House.

We have already heard a number of powerful speeches, and I especially shared the general enthusiasm for the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy), who vividly reminded us what a privilege it is to be here to represent constituents and to voice the concerns of the electors who sent us to the House. He made a tremendous speech that will remain with many of us for a long time.

Of course I share also the general enthusiasm of Labour Members for the party's very convincing election victory and the fact that it is able to embark on a full second term in government. We have looked forward to that for a long time, and, given the priorities announced in the Queen's Speech I am sure that we will use the time wisely, to the benefit of the people of this country. The Queen's Speech will enable us to build on some of the first-term achievements that are to the Government's credit and to

work towards our priorities, particularly the great improvements in public services that are necessary. Those priorities are shared by Labour Members, obviously, and more widely in the Chamber. Education, health, transport and welfare reform are certainly dear to my heart.

I was glad that the Queen's Speech places a continuing emphasis on the importance of our international commitments, and I am pleased that we will be proceeding with the International Development Bill. I greatly welcome the fact that we will introduce an export control Bill, because export control is an important part of responsibility in international relations. I am also pleased about the strong commitment to European involvement and, in particular, to enlargement of the European Union. Although the heady days of the fall of the Berlin wall were a long time ago, the possibility of building a new, durable relationship with countries from which we were previously irrevocably divided by the iron curtain is very exciting. So far, it does not seem to have grabbed the attention of our electors, but I hope that the Government will campaign enthusiastically for enlargement in the coming months and years.

I am pleased that the Queen's Speech includes a continuing commitment to constitutional reform. I refer in particular to reform of the House of Lords and to improving women's representation in political and public life. I welcome the commitment to the devolution process. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) reminded us that devolution is important not only in Scotland and Wales but in Northern Ireland. I agree with him that devolution ensures representation of different elements of the community in Northern Ireland, and I am very much in favour of that.

I want to say a few words about devolution as it relates to England. I speak from the viewpoint of my constituency and my part of England. I welcome the fact that enshrined in the manifesto on which my hon. Friends and I fought the election is an on-going commitment to make provision for directly elected regional government in regions where people support the idea in a referendum. I welcome also the fact that the manifesto for my part of the country, which was launched by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Durham (Ms Armstrong), now the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, said that proposals for consultation on regional government would be made early in this Parliament. I hope and expect that that will be the case.

I shall set out briefly why I believe that devolution is important, but first I want to make it clear that I do not believe that it is a theoretical issue of interest only to politicians. It has practical meaning for our fellow citizens. Regional systems elsewhere have been responsible for economic success. That is why I am glad that the Government created the regional development agencies in their first term and stressed the economic development aspects of the process. It is important that regions are able to bring together their economic forces, recognise their strengths and tackle their weaknesses.

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire talked at length about agriculture, which, given his constituency, is not surprising. I feel strongly that it is important for agriculture to be seen as part and parcel of the rural economy. We must also consider what agriculture can contribute to the regional economy. The present departmental structure will highlight

agriculture and other economic sectors and enable us to look positively at their potential, as will increasing devolution.

Devolution will help to give the regions a powerful voice. We have an asymmetric arrangement in Parliament and Government, and the north-east of England sometimes looks enviously at the political weight that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have. England has a large population, and the regions need to increase their voice in government so that when policies are formulated and funding is discussed their interests are taken into account. When European policies are formulated, we should consider them not only as they promote the interests of the United Kingdom as a whole but as they affect its different parts.

Regional government would give people a sense of ownership of existing regional bodies. People often talk as if we did not have a regional tier, but of course we have the Government offices of the regions and many other regional bodies. Often, however, public involvement in the regions in those bodies is quite slight. I would like there to be an increased sense of ownership in the regions, and believe that regional government is one way of achieving that.

Many of us who have campaigned on the issue for a considerable time have become very used to the objection, "People in pubs and clubs are not talking about it." It is true that if I go into a pub or club in Gateshead, I am not usually first asked about the matter. However, certainly in my part of the world, people feel that central Government have often been remote and that our system could be reformed in order to give the regions a bigger say and a feeling of greater involvement.

Perhaps such reform would also help to tackle the concerns rightly voiced by Members of all parties about the participation rate in elections and the level of turnout. I certainly did not agree with the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who seemed to think that the problem was simply one with which the Government must deal. All of us as politicians like people to vote, and therefore we all have an interest in considering how to increase voter participation as much as possible.

Regional government would be good not just for areas such as mine, where there is a strong sense of identity, but simply because the matter is not only about identity; it is about good governance and making decisions at the appropriate levels.

Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Is my right hon. Friend aware that when companies are deciding whether to invest in Milton Keynes, we are competing with those from Barcelona and Stuttgart, and that both those cities have regional governments backing them up? We do not have that advantage in the south-east of England.

Joyce Quin: I accept that. The point has often been made to me that in some parts of the country there is not a strong sense of identity. The south-east is often mentioned, and so is the east midlands, yet I have noticed that Derby, Nottingham and Leicester have come together greatly in economic development. There is real interest in the south-east, too, in how to approach such issues in a joined-up, regional way. My hon. Friend's point is valid.

It is important for us to take into account the issue of devolution. This Government have already shown by their policies that they are firmly regionally focused. Many in

my part of the country feel strongly about the issue. Progress can be made in a way that can provide benefits not only to people in my part of the country but across the United Kingdom as a whole.

6.2 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I should like first to take up some points made by the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who, unfortunately, is not in the Chamber at the moment. He made some matters clear to the House from his point of view, and they are alarming to the Unionists of Northern Ireland. The fact that he did so was definitely a kite-flying exercise; we can expect that the matters to which he referred will be part of a new deal that is about to be brokered in Northern Ireland: coming at this time, I look at them very suspiciously.

The House should remember that, today, schoolchildren in the Ardoyne area were attacked by republicans. I understand that rioting is still going on. It was a vicious attack on schoolchildren who were trying to get to the place where they should be taught. Let no one think that repetition of the words "peace process" means that there is peace.

The right hon. Gentleman said that Unionists had "irretrievably hooked" themselves to decommissioning. I should like to examine that statement. The promise was made to the people of Northern Ireland that there would be decommissioning, but it has not been honoured or kept. Consideration of the implementation of that promise has been put away. Dates have been set; they have not been honoured. More dates have been set, and they have not been honoured. Still more dates have been set, but not honoured.

It is not the Unionists who hooked themselves to decommissioning. We did so because of a promise made by this Government, which the Prime Minister, in order to push through the referendum, was prepared to write on a wall in Northern Ireland. He said, "Except that this happens; nothing else will happen. You are going to receive decommissioning." We have not received decommissioning.

If the right hon. Member for Hartlepool thinks that the people of Northern Ireland will be satisfied with gentlemen from time to time inspecting some carefully marked out places in the south of Ireland—which are under the supreme control of the IRA high command and enjoy all the immunity that would be given in the Republic to the property of another state—and then reporting that all is well, he is living in cuckoo land. The people of Northern Ireland are not bluffed or fooled by such visits. They are not fooled by the bunkers either. The IRA has no intention of decommissioning at this time.

When the leader of IRA-Sinn Féin came out of Downing street the other day, what did he say? He did not say that before 1 July we could have decommissioning. He said that he did not think that there would be any decommissioning before 1 July. He is better able to report on the matter because, as a member of the IRA authority and its governing army council, he knows exactly what is taking place.

It is a very serious matter for Governments to make promises. I heard the Prime Minister say from the Dispatch Box today that one should not make promises that one cannot keep. We in Northern Ireland have seen promise after promise made and promise after promise

[Rev. Ian Paisley]

broken. When the right hon. Member for Hartlepool suggests, as he has today that there are now matters on which more concessions could be made and that there could be more encouragement of the IRA, he is really telling us that this Government's only policy is one of concession and of not facing up to the reality.

It is of course very easy for the right hon. Gentleman to stand in this House and brand all those who will not vote for his policies as extremists. I smiled when he referred to the Sunningdale agreement and some other matters. I remind him that, at the time of that agreement, all the Unionist parties were united. He would not suggest in a speech today that they were all extremists. They united to resist an attempt to fly in the face of democracy.

If it is extreme to say that those who are responsible for the most atrocious murders and, shockingly, have even mutilated the bodies of those whom they have murdered, should do their time in prison and pay their debt to society, I am glad to be an extremist. They should do their time and pay their price to society. I have stood in homes where the coffin could not be opened and the bereaved could not look on the mutilated corpse. The persons responsible for that are on the streets—free men in Ulster today. If it is extremism to denounce that, then many people are extremists. If Parliament made a law that enabled such a thing to happen in Wales, Scotland, or any part of England, there would be an outcry, but it has happened in the part of the United Kingdom that I represent.

If it is extreme to say that the police who were recruited from both sides of the religious divide and who stood the hottest fire in the days when the Provisional IRA was at its murderous work, should not be at the negotiating table and that their standing and future should not be negotiated by the men who killed them and left their children orphans, then I am an extremist. If it is extreme to say that the matter of the police should not be negotiated by any terrorist and that no terrorist has a right to be at the table to negotiate the future of the police force, then there are many people who are extremists.

Recently, one IRA leader made the amazing statement that, unless they were given an undertaking that the police in Northern Ireland would never be allowed to have baton rounds in their possession, they would never co-operate with the police. The demands get larger and more aggressive as the concessions become greater, and surrender is the order of the day as far as the Labour Government are concerned.

Is it extreme to say that security should not be relaxed in Northern Ireland? The right hon. Member for Hartlepool suggested that security should be relaxed in—of all places—Armagh, where Protestant genocide has taken place. An elder of my Church was taken from his home in Armagh; a bag was put over his head and he was hauled out by IRA men. For hours he was held at gunpoint and he, his wife and his children were threatened. I sat with that man and his family and I realised to what depths they had been taken at the hands of those murderers. Yet, now we are told that security concessions might be made in the Armagh area.

On the doorsteps and in all our canvassing, we were told that people are concerned about the fact that the criminal elements let loose in our Province are now

engaging in all sorts of criminal acts. We have muggings and burglaries and there has been a decrease in security generally throughout Northern Ireland. When I asked the police superintendent in one area of my North Antrim constituency, "What is your problem, sir?" he answered "My problem is that I am 40 policemen short and I will not get those men until the new regime comes in and men are trained to take their place, so I'll not have them for six to nine months." A police officer in another part of my constituency told me, "I am 30 men short." Those who represent Northern Ireland constituencies have heard the same from their local police. It is unfair to make the police the target of attack and say that we must change things to please those who seek their destruction.

What sort of a country is it when those who walk to a place of worship on or around 12 July are not allowed to return from the church in which they worshipped because of an IRA threat? It was an IRA threat: Mr. Adams himself said, on Radio Telefis Eireann, "We have worked for years to get these roads blocked—do you think we're now going to run away and let people walk down these roads?" What sort of a country is it when a person is branded as extreme for saying that those people should be able to walk back from their place of worship?

Those are matters that should concern the House, because a central element of Government policy—I have been told this by the Prime Minister and by all the Northern Ireland Ministers—is that any settlement must have the support, not only of the majority of people living in Northern Ireland, but of a majority within both sections of the Northern Ireland community. They tell us that they are bound to that rule, but they are not—I wish that they were so bound, because if they were, they would now have to admit that the majority of the Unionist population does not support the agreement. One has only to look at the figures to see that. I am glad that those journalists in Northern Ireland who are no supporters of my opposition to the agreement or that of others admit that at the general election the majority of Unionists voted against the agreement.

Let us look at the figures taking into account the votes for official Unionist candidates who may or may not have been anti-agreement. If we add those votes, we see how big the majority was. At least 60 per cent. of Unionist people have said that they are not in agreement. I accept that every nationalist vote in the election was cast for pro-agreement candidates—there is no doubt about that; but one could not say that the majority of Unionist votes were cast for pro-agreement candidates. The Democratic Unionist party achieved a total of 181,999 votes across 14 constituencies. We directly contested 13 constituencies with the Ulster Unionist party: in those seats, we got five Members of Parliament elected to the UUP's four; we finished ahead of the UUP in eight constituencies and behind in five; and the DUP got 166,450 votes to the UUP's 146,538.

Those are the election figures—let no one try to put a spin on them. Today, a majority of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland say that they are not going to wear the agreement. We are saying that the Government must keep to their word about having to have the support of a majority of both communities. We do not dispute that they have the support of a majority of the nationalist community, but they certainly do not have the support of a majority of the Unionist community. They must renegotiate and go back to the drawing board.

The agreement itself mentioned a review, so why can we not have such a review of the agreement? If the shoe were on the other foot—if those objecting were nationalists and Roman Catholics—the Government would hasten to negotiate with them; but because those who are objecting are Unionists and Protestants, they are not to have their democratic rights.

If the House thinks that elections can take place in Northern Ireland and the results can be forgotten, it will plough on regardless. In that event, the House will reap what it has sown, and the reaping will be serious. Those who have voted and exercised their franchise are the people who have supported the forces of law and order. By serving in the security forces, they have given their sons to be murdered, as well as their daughters. They have given their husbands and wives to be murdered. I salute my Roman Catholic fellow countrymen who have joined the police and the Army in serious circumstances. I know what happens when the lad who is in the Army or in the police wants to see his parents. There is a family in my constituency where the father and the mother have to fly to London to meet their son, who is in the Royal Ulster Constabulary. That is an indictment of any society that claims to be democratic, but that is what is happening in Northern Ireland.

The issue should rest with the Government. They should return to the drawing board, accept the facts of life in Northern Ireland and seek to find a way whereby a majority of Unionists and a majority of nationalists can agree. That was the original basis of the agreement.

We need a devolved assembly in Northern Ireland, but it must be democratic, fair and accountable. If we do not have fairness, democracy or accountability, we do not have the basis for good government.

No self-respecting democrat is prepared to negotiate the future of his country with the representatives of terrorism, who may say that they have a mandate. On that basis, every murderer who has a mandate should be free. However, he is not free. The murderer has to pay the price for his crime or law-breaking. In any democratic society there is no place for representatives of terrorism to be involved in negotiations and to have their way. However, on every occasion they increase their demands.

The right hon. Member for Hartlepool took the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill through the House. Having taken its place on the statute book, the representatives of the SDLP and Sinn Féin say that the Act must be changed. They say, "If it isn't changed, we shan't have anything to do with the police." As I have said, the Bill was taken through the House. There were arguments and votes and in the end the measure was accepted by the House. However, we are told that Mr. Adams and the Social Democratic and Labour party spokesman say that they will not accept it and that it must be changed. I think that the right hon. Member for Hartlepool hinted that he felt that it should not be changed until it had first been put into operation. I have set out what is happening in my country.

The decommissioning of terrorist weapons must take place. What is the position if we are in negotiations, as the Government are, and they are told, "If you don't do what we want you to do, we can always go back"? That is what a member of the Stormont Assembly, a Sinn Féiner, told us some time ago. He said, "We shall go back to what we are best at doing." If that is not blackmail, I do not know what it would be.

Any relationship with the Republic of Ireland should be fully accountable to the Assembly. There is trouble in the Garvaghy road and there is a gentleman from South Africa who is supposed to be a mediator. I think they call him Mr. Curran. He admitted that there was no doubt that the southern Government was pouring many thousands of pounds into the Garvaghy estate. A so-called friendly Government are pouring many thousands of pounds into an estate. That goes to the very heart of the question of civil liberty and religious freedom. At a meeting of officials and others, Mr. Curran made that statement. Admittedly, it was confirmed by a member of the present Government. It is true that the southern Ireland Government are feeding money into the estate.

The Democratic Unionist party believes that something should be done quickly to restore the morale and effectiveness of the RUC. My party and I oppose the idea that in future all recruitment should be guided by a sectarian recruitment policy. Religion and not ability will lead to a place within the force, and I do not accept that for a minute. That is not the way to recruit police. Everyone must be equal under the law and equally subject to it. We must strive for genuine equality, including equality of funding and provision for Unionist areas.

The result of a recent poll in Northern Ireland—it was not given the same publicity as other polls—showed that more than 50 per cent. of Protestants in Northern Ireland recognise that they are unfairly treated under the present system and that there is favour of treatment for Roman Catholics under the present system. If that is so, the House needs to face its responsibility.

The veto in any democracy is the ballot box. The people should have their say. The people of Northern Ireland spoke at the general election, as they spoke at the European elections about two years ago. I was told at that time, "We are not even looking at those votes. We are not even thinking that those votes have anything to do with the situation." When a Government cease to have respect for the ballot box, no one can give them the respect that he should be able to give them in a democracy.

These are matters that many hon. Members do not want to hear. There are a few lines about Northern Ireland in the Queen's Speech. The Leader of the Opposition mentioned Northern Ireland but the Prime Minister did not mention it at all. There was not a line in the right hon. Gentleman's speech about it. However, I am talking about serious matters. If we look to a happier future for Northern Ireland, we need to apply ourselves urgently to these matters and ensure that we establish a foundation to which the majority on both sides in Northern Ireland can agree.

6.28 pm

Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): One of the reasons why religion and tolerance are often at odds is that religion is concerned with absolute truth. At one time, law and politics were suffused by religion. Law was often used to enforce conformity, at great cost to ordinary people.

I am not saying that the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) is not talking about serious issues. Nothing could be as serious as the organised death of his constituents. However, his absolutist approach does not accord with the possibilities of politics, however imperfect. I support what is said about Northern Ireland

[Ross Cranston]

in the Gracious Speech, albeit that the measures that flow from it may not be those that any of us would want in an ideal world.

I congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your reappointment. We share neighbouring constituencies, so I have long known your ideal qualities. However, in the previous Session of Parliament, the whole House started to appreciate your fairness, competence and light touch. I am sure that I am expressing the universal view of the House in congratulating you on your reappointment.

I want to identify three themes that run through the Queen's Speech and use them as a framework for my remarks. The first theme is economic stability and growth, without which other themes, such as social justice and investment in public services, are an uphill struggle. In fact, economic stability and growth are the bedrock of all that we want to achieve in government. This afternoon, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out our successes, including the fact that we have overcome the problem of the national debt, that interest rates are now at an historic low and that unemployment is at its lowest for 25 years. Our commitment and action on full employment are especially important, because nothing robbed young people of their dignity more than the high unemployment that operated before 1997. We must build on our successes in that area, which is why I welcome the enterprise Bill mentioned in the Gracious Speech.

Obviously, greater employment helps economic growth, but employees' productivity is also vital. The productivity gap is one of the biggest challenges that we face. The figures set out in the Treasury document "Productivity in the UK: Enterprise and the Productivity Challenge", which was published last November, clearly demonstrate that output and gross domestic product per worker in this country are lower than in other comparable countries. Of course, there are measurement problems; recently, a study for the London business school journal demonstrated that, to some extent, the official figures underestimate manufacturing productivity. That, Madam Deputy Speaker, is good news for our respective constituencies, in both of which manufacturing is important. It is not all doom and gloom. Productivity growth in manufacturing has been rising but, none the less, the productivity gap remains a significant problem.

Once, a reason for that was the low capital investment in this country compared with others, which goes back more than 100 years. Economic historians talk about the division between the City and industry in the late 19th century, failures in financial markets and so on. Again, it is not all doom and gloom. Business investment has been growing and the stability and low interest rates that we have delivered in the last four years are certainly important factors in encouraging more investment.

The problem with the other side of productivity—human capital—turns on a number of factors. There is a problem with skills; again, the Treasury document demonstrated that in this country intermediate skills are much lower than in countries such as Germany. I therefore welcome the education Bill, with its focus on improving secondary schools and finding vocational pathways for the over-14s.

One striking feature that has come out of the literature is the wide variation in firms' productivity. Queen Mary and Westfield college research found that productivity in

manufacturing plants sometimes varied by a factor of five or six, which is confirmed by the emerging finds in the McKinsey study of manufacturing. What is the explanation for that? Management has something to do with it. In his book "From Empire to Europe", Geoffrey Owen points to the historic failing of some British managers to realise the true sources of competitive advantage, the inability to choose correct strategies, obsolete thinking and so on.

The competitive environment is also important. Competition, of course, encourages innovation and efficient organisation and will ultimately reallocate resources in favour of the efficient. I am especially heartened by the provisions in the enterprise Bill to strengthen the competition authorities and to ratchet up the deterrents for anti-competitive behaviour, including the possibility of imprisonment in addition to fines imposed on companies for cartelisation. That has long been a possibility in the United States, where the issue goes back to the General Electric case in the 1960s. That does not mean that directors will go to jail, but it will certainly have a chilling effect on behaviour that encourages cartels. I also support the notion of consumers having a greater input in the actions of the competition authorities.

There is a suggestion that the provisions for administrative receivership will be changed. I recommended that our system of administrative receivership be adopted in other countries when I was a member of World Bank and other missions, so I have some interest in the matter. I shall wait to see the details. In theory, our system is drastic; a minor breach of provisions allows the bank to appoint a receiver, so there may well be a case for bringing the theory into line with the practice.

The second theme in the Gracious Speech concerns the measures underpinning social responsibility. The Government believe that there is such a thing as a society but, as rights are conferred on people, the correlative is that there are responsibilities. That theme has a special resonance for criminal behaviour and, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister pointed out this afternoon, we have achieved a great deal in tackling that: crime is down and the mechanisms for dealing with antisocial behaviour are now kicking in. However, there are still problems with repeat offending and organised crime.

Persistent offending is not a new phenomenon; anyone associated with the criminal courts will realise that defendants often have a record as long as the proverbial arm. However, emerging findings that approximately 100,000 persistent offenders are responsible for about half of all crime has brought the issue centre stage. I therefore welcome the criminal justice Bill. We have to get the message across that persistent offenders must go straight, and the provisions for enhanced supervision will go some way in that regard.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. and learned Gentleman is certainly not alone in recognising the existence of society, but may I put it to him that he is wrong to depict a dichotomy between atomised individuals and the state? Will he pay proper tribute to the contribution made to our civic life by voluntary organisations, church groups and charitable institutions?

Ross Cranston: The hon. Gentleman was becoming philosophical in the first part of his remarks, but I agree

with the practical implications of what he said. Civil society is important. One of the problems in the United States is that civil society has broken down in some respects, and we would not want that to occur here. My constituency has active groups across the range of institutions that he mentioned. They are important and we would want them enhanced.

The criminal justice Bill will contain provisions on sentencing and we await the publication of the Halliday review, which will allow sentencers to tailor sentences not only to the crime but to the criminal. In principle, that is nothing new. Sentencers have always had the defendant's record before them and it was only for a short period under the previous Government in the early 1990s that one was prohibited from taking into account the defendant's record.

The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) raised the spectre of civil liberties and the problems that that poses for issues such as double jeopardy and the use of previous convictions. The Law Commission's proposals on double jeopardy are limited in scope to where DNA evidence emerges in relation to serious offending. With regard to previous convictions, the devil is in the detail, but there can be no objection to the proposals in principle. Previous convictions can be admitted now as similar fact evidence and if the defendant attacks a prosecution witness. But they must be relevant and not give rise to prejudice. I look forward to scrutinising the relevant provisions.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Does the hon. and learned Gentleman recognise that double jeopardy was not granted easily by the Executive but a right that had to be fought for over a long period? Does he accept that such rights should not be cast aside without some understanding of their consequences for the judicial and juridical systems?

Ross Cranston: Yes, we must consider carefully any change in the system, but had we not changed the criminal justice system, defendants would not be represented, nor would they be able to give evidence. The system moves on. It must accord with modern conditions. This is precisely an area where the criminal procedure must move on.

I welcome the proceeds of crime Bill. There is a technical need for a change here. Two different strands of law relate to the proceeds of crime, one under the drug trafficking legislation and the other under the Criminal Justice Act 1988. Commentators have long pointed out the problems in application because we have those two strands, so there is a good case for change simply on technical grounds. But the Bill will go much further and provide an institutional framework, an agency, that will have the task of seizing the proceeds of crime. In addition, it will provide a civil power not associated with any particular criminal conviction to strip criminals of any ill-gotten gains.

The third theme of the Gracious Speech relates to social justice and improving our public services. It contains a range of provisions, including the tax credit Bill, the education Bill, the NHS reform Bill, and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Joyce Quin) mentioned, at an international level, the export control and non-proliferation Bill. My right

hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave the figures this afternoon for recent investment in public services. Social justice and good public services are at the core of Labour values, and they are linked in that good public services can have an ameliorative effect on social inequality.

Two specific issues run through the debate on public services. The first is the delivery mechanism. The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) suggested that somehow, by use of the private finance initiative, we were denigrating public services. There can be criticism of some PFIs. There has been uncertainty on the part of staff who are to be transferred and their fears must be allayed. Some contracts have been ineptly drawn, for example by not having a clawback provision in the event of windfall gains on refinancing, but as Member for a constituency that is about to get a new hospital under the PFI, I support the PFI and the potential that it brings to public services. We in Dudley would not be having a new hospital in the near future if we had to wait for public financing.

My second general point on public services concerns targets. The Leader of the Opposition mentioned targets. Commentators line up to criticise targets, although most have never run more than their expense accounts. I would not deny that targets sometimes have perverse effects, but that is not universal, or even typical. In the area of criminal justice in which I was privileged to serve in government, targets had a beneficial effect, not just in themselves, but because they required the criminal justice agencies to work together as never before. Therefore, I do not go along with the modern and fashionable criticism of all targets.

I welcome the measures contained in the Queen's Speech. They will allow the Government to build on the successes of the past four years. They will contribute to the competitive environment, and thus to economic growth. They will underline social responsibility and they will strengthen our public services and further social justice.

6.47 pm

Tony Baldry (Banbury): The hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston) is right to draw the attention of the House to the lack of competitiveness in Britain compared with other EC countries, and to concerns about productivity, but that will not be improved simply by introducing further legislation to strengthen the Office of Fair Trading. If he talks to manufacturers in the west midlands he will discover that their concerns are not about some cartels working against their interests, but about over-regulation, an economy with far too much red tape and a Government who, whenever they see an issue, have been far too inclined to introduce further regulations, legislation and red tape.

Whatever fine words the hon. and learned Gentleman, as a former Solicitor-General, may use about the criminal justice system, I find it extraordinary that it should be a Labour Government and the Labour party who look as though they will abandon wholesale the right of English citizens to a trial by jury. I hope that at some stage, lawyers who are inclined to support the Labour party will explain to Ministers what damage that will do—forever—to the Labour party's supposed reputation for supporting civil liberties and human rights.

Today there is a lot of pageantry, pomp, ceremony and backslapping, but all of us would do well to have a fair sense of humility, including the hon. Member for

[Tony Baldry]

Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay). We all need a fair degree of humility, because none of us came out of the general election especially well. I say to Ministers that Labour has the lowest share of the eligible electorate of any Government for more than a century. The Labour party received fewer votes than any winning party since universal suffrage was introduced in 1928. Indeed, even when Neil Kinnock lost in 1992, he secured more votes than the Labour party has now gained in winning, so any talk of a landslide or of a great mandate is very wide of the mark. As has also been pointed out, the Liberal Democrats received fewer votes than at any election since 1983. As for the Conservative Benches, I think the facts speak for themselves. None of us comes out of the election especially well.

It is of particular concern to me that in my constituency, 40 per cent. of the electorate did not consider it worth voting at all. Like every other colleague in the House, I knocked on a good few doors during the election campaign. By and large, I was always greeted well and courteously. Most people recognised me and were pleased to see me on their doorstep, and there was no antagonism or hostility. There were rare occasions when I wanted to leave "Sorry you were in" cards, rather than "Sorry you were out" cards, but I was most concerned by the lack of interest in the whole process.

I do not think that it behoves us to blame our constituents for that lack of interest. We must consider what it is about this place that causes large numbers of people, especially the young, to be turned off completely by the process. I cannot believe that I am alone in having that feeling. I suspect that many hon. Members from all parties find that active party workers tend to be older, and that the help of younger people is increasingly difficult to gain. When I visit schools in my constituency, I find that younger people consider Members of Parliament, the parliamentary process and Parliament as an institution to be increasingly remote.

Part of the problem is that people are turned off not only by spin, but by the knockabout, yah-boo politics that often represents this place. For example, Prime Minister's Question Time is jolly good theatre, and might help Sky Television's ratings in the United States, but it does not help to inform public policy or to tell the electorate what we are doing. All of us need to pay some attention to working out not only how best we can disagree, but how we can acknowledge that we agree with one another on some occasions.

I do not suppose that any of us pretend we have all the answers on many public policy issues nowadays. Indeed, I suspect that we may agree on more such issues than we disagree on. The right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, made an interesting speech about the politics of Northern Ireland, and I suspect that, by and large, very few hon. Members disagreed with his remarks. [Interruption.] I said that very few hon. Members would have disagreed; obviously, there are exceptions. My point is that we must give some thought to how we conduct ourselves in Parliament, especially as Back Benchers.

I very much agreed with the comments of the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), who, like me, entered the House in 1983. I think that hon. Members increasingly appear to be nearing their last

chance to assert any sort of realistic control over the Executive. When Select Committees were introduced, there were reasonably high hopes that they would provide an effective control. By and large, they have been useful. In the previous Parliament, I served on the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, and I found the experience fascinating and interesting. However, I believe that in terms of controlling the Executive, the Select Committee is of pretty limited value, especially if its members, whether from the Government party or Opposition parties, are present only because of the patronage of their party Whips.

I agree that Labour Back Benchers will have most control, simply because they form the greatest number of people who can influence the Executive. I encourage people not to dissent or rebel, but to promote constructive engagement with policy and to seek to ensure that this House and all hon. Members can have some effective influence on policy and on government. Otherwise, come the next general election, fewer people will vote and we will find even less interest on the doorstep and even greater disenchantment.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Same result.

Tony Baldry: It is not the result that matters. I know that the hon. Gentleman has Parliament's interests at heart, so he will recognise that it is not a question of who is sitting on the Government and the Opposition Front Benches. It cannot be in the interests of any hon. Member for Parliament to be seen as an increasingly marginal institution, and for its state opening to be perceived to be akin to trooping the colour and as relevant as that event. I hope that during the current Parliament, we can try to work out how to re-engage with the nation as a whole. It is not the fault of the public that they are not voting; it is our fault that we are not giving them reasons to feel that they should support Parliament as an institution. Members of Parliament—especially Back Benchers—must work out how to exercise more effective control over the Executive.

Andrew Mackinlay: Does the hon. Gentleman share my frustration and look to current Front Benchers in the context of the Pauline conversion that he seems to have undergone? I do not doubt for one moment the sincerity of his remarks, with which I agree, but he makes them having taken the Major shilling. There are also people who have taken the Blair shilling. That is the problem. Why do not some Front Benchers stand up now and say what they mean and mean what they say, rather than waiting until they are removed to the Back Benches?

Tony Baldry: Of course it is right and proper for Ministers to abide by collective responsibility, irrespective of the Government to whom they belong. That must be the case, because no Government could work without collective responsibility. When I was privileged enough to be a Minister and to stand at the Dispatch Box, the people who often caused me the greatest difficulty and who made the greatest mark on Government policy were not necessarily Opposition Members, but the awkward squad, such as the late lamented Nick Budgen and others of that ilk. They were good parliamentarians because they sought to hold us to account. I had one eye over my shoulder to see what was happening on the Benches

behind me more often than I was concerned with the then Opposition. There has been no conversion; we all have a part to play in this place, but as Back Benchers, in this Parliament especially, we must seek to assert our rights over the Executive more if this place is not to be genuinely marginalised.

Irrespective of the Queen's Speech, two themes will dominate the current Parliament. One of them is obvious and the other is not so obvious. The obvious theme is the delivery of public services. I must say again that I do not think that that is a question merely of legislation. One cannot legislate to provide a better health service. In my constituency, there are significant concerns about the ability to deliver in the Horton hospital and the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford. Waiting lists are growing longer, as we were shown in April by the most recently published figures. There is also a considerable shortage of nurses. The Horton has nurse vacancies of 10 per cent., and some 10 per cent. of our nurses have travelled around the world from Australia. They are jolly welcome, but they are here today and gone tomorrow. All the legislation in the world will not help unless we can recruit and retain nurses by paying them decently—and likewise general practitioners, doctors and teachers.

We have to discover ways to improve the quality of public services without for ever hiking up taxes. That will require careful and cogent thought. The private finance initiative has been helpful in providing capital structures such as new hospitals, but those have no value, in Dudley or anywhere else, if they lack nurses and doctors. I am sure that when canvassing in the general election campaign, every hon. Member knocked on the doors of constituents who explained how long they had waited for a hip replacement or other operation. On the eve of poll, I met a lady who had to wait until next February simply to see a consultant to work out when she might have an operation to replace her hip. In the 21st century, that is appalling.

I do not believe that the Government can finesse matters simply by introducing several Bills. They will not be able to finesse to the satisfaction of people who live on housing estates and are worried about crime, disorder and antisocial behaviour. It is no good introducing more and more legislation. Those residents want police officers on the estates who can arrest people and bring them before the magistrates. That is simple and straightforward. The provision of public services will be at the forefront of everyone's concerns throughout the Parliament.

A less obvious concern, which will nevertheless preoccupy us during the Parliament, is our relationship with Europe. The Queen's Speech contained a short passage about that. In the context of Pauline conversions, I am glad that almost all those who have thrown their hats in the ring for the leadership of the Conservative party acknowledge that the European Union is not such an article of faith that one should be burnt at the stake for taking different views about it. Hallelujah! The Conservative party can revert to being the broad church that it was under Winston Churchill, Harold Macmillan, Ted Heath—and, I am bound to say, even Baroness Thatcher. When I started out in politics, I worked in her private office on the Britain in Europe campaign. Indeed, the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire and I worked together, because I was the link between Baroness Thatcher and the campaign. I have speeches in her

handwriting that urge people to vote yes to Europe. I hope that we can all get away from the preoccupation with the euro.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: If the hon. Gentleman has several such speeches in his repository, does not he owe it to posterity to publish them at the first opportunity?

Tony Baldry: If I fell on lean times, I might have to auction them.

The Government's five tests are self-serving; the Prime Minister will call a referendum on the euro only if he believes that he can win it and that it will redound to the credit of the Labour party in a subsequent general election. That is pretty synthetic. Conservative Members should claim greater credit for the fact that John Major got us the opt-out on the single currency that has enabled Britain to take time to decide whether we want to join it. We failed to take the credit that was due to us for that.

Aside from the euro, both the Irish referendum and our dealings with our constituents show that the phrase "democratic deficit" is an understatement. How many hon. Members could name the Members of the European Parliament who represent different regions of the country, as we represent constituencies? Hon. Members' faces suggest that few could get all the names right. Consideration of Europe should not be dominated by whether we support the euro. Let us move to more positive ground.

I am sure that all hon. Members agree that we should have a competitive, responsive European Union that people believe relates to them, and with which they can engage. We can build on that and support a European Union that welcomes the countries of eastern Europe. Most members of my generation remember with joy the tearing down of the Berlin wall and the dismantling of the Warsaw pact and the Soviet Union. Our ability to welcome such countries into the European Union is a fantastic triumph that we should celebrate. I was 18 when the tanks rolled into Prague in 1968. People had a humiliating feeling of powerlessness. No one could do anything about what was happening.

Instead of believing that the European Union is somehow taking us over, we should celebrate what we can achieve in Europe. We should be bold in doing that in this Parliament. Like any political institution, it is far from perfect, but we should acknowledge that we and other democrats in Europe have the capacity to change it. Perhaps it has taken a drubbing at the polls for my party to recognise that, although people in the United Kingdom might not love the European Union, they do not wish to leave it. The United Kingdom Independence party candidate in Banbury received only 600 votes.

All hon. Members should approach this Parliament with considerable humility, and a determination to try to re-engage the people of this country in the political and parliamentary process. Back Benchers should be keen to devise ways in which to hold the Executive legitimately to account. We should also acknowledge that we can often agree. The Chamber need not be a place where the only measure of success is how ably we confront each other. We must all work out ways in which to provide better public services and engage in improving our standing in the European Union. That should be celebrated, not condemned.

7.7 pm

David Winnick (Walsall, North): As the hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) mentioned the matter, I should say that I was older than 18 when the tanks rolled into Prague in 1968. I was here, participating in a debate on that. I had recently returned from a private visit to Turkey, and I was the last Labour Back Benchers to speak when the House was recalled at the end of August 1968.

It is good to be back here, after the election, sitting on the Government side again. Like some colleagues, I spent 18 consecutive years from 1979 to 1997 on the Opposition Benches.

We should be worried about low turnout. Perhaps people took it for granted that the Labour Government would be returned with a large majority. Although the Prime Minister and the rest of us tried to undermine such complacency, persistent Labour leads in the opinion polls contributed to a feeling of, "Well, Labour's going to get in, so why bother?" A writer in *The Daily Telegraph* today argues that a feel-good factor contributed to a turnout that was lower than usual. I agree with the hon. Member for Banbury that, whatever the explanation, none of us should be complacent. It is unfortunate that the turnout was much lower than in previous general elections.

As long as the integrity of the voting process can be protected, there is a case for a wider range of voting methods than the orthodox way of going to the polling station. I support that provided that we can be confident about maintaining the integrity of the process. Let me mention the more controversial issue of what is known inaccurately as compulsory voting. We should examine the position in Australia, where citizens are obliged to vote unless they declare beforehand that they do not intend to do so or abstain in person at the polling station. We cannot have compulsory voting as such for the obvious reason that we can hardly force religious minorities such as, for instance, Jehovah's Witnesses, who will not vote on principle, to do so. That would be most undemocratic. I do not believe that Australia is a less democratic country than Britain. All that I would argue at this stage is that the Electoral Commission could perhaps look into the matter, as well as the Home Affairs Committee.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) gave certain warnings to all sides. I do not intend to give any advice to the Conservative party; that is not my role. However, I want to make one or two points about the position of the parliamentary Labour party. The hon. Member for Banbury referred to humility, and that is the one thing above all others that we have to show after the second successive Labour landslide.

I watched Conservative Members for 18 years, particularly after their second and third electoral victories in 1983 and 1987, which was when their arrogance grew. They came to hold the view that they were unbeatable, and that the situation had so changed in this country that, no matter who led the Labour party or what policies we had, we were unable to get a majority in the House of Commons. More and more Conservatives took the view that, whatever happened, they were going to sit on this side of the House for a very long time to come.

It is important that we avoid that feeling of arrogance. If the electorate get fed up with us, be it at the next election or at any other one, they will turn us out.

No matter what state of disarray the Conservative party may be in—and it may not be in such a state at the next election—and whoever leads it, if the electorate want to get rid of us, they will. For heaven's sake, let us always bear that in mind. Apart from anything else, it might mean that we spend longer here on the Government side. We will be judged on many other matters, such as delivery and the management—if it can be described as such—of the economy, but humility is a factor that should not be ignored.

The good thing is that when I was out on the doorstep, like all hon. Members, day after day, although criticisms and reservations obviously were expressed—it would be strange if they had not been—I did not get the feeling that the electorate looked on Labour MPs standing for re-election as an arrogant bunch. That was encouraging and I hope that it continues to be the case.

I want to make one or two points, following what the hon. Member for Banbury said, about this House. There is bound to be a difference in, say, the situation between 1974 and 1979—or after the 1992 election, when the Conservatives' majority had been whittled down to a rather narrow one—and between the previous Parliament and now. Obviously, when a majority is narrow or almost non-existent—as it was between 1974 and 1979—the Chamber is bound to have much more of an impact. That goes without saying. I can just imagine the situation—I was between seats at the time—when there was a vote of confidence on 28 March 1979. Such circumstances are hardly likely to arise in this Parliament.

There might be ways in which we could examine how we conduct our affairs, to see whether we could improve matters. Let us take Opposition days, for example. In many respects, they have become a sort of ritual. There is very low attendance. Every effort is made on both sides of the House to ensure that Members come in for the main speeches, which is understandable; that is the role of the Whips. However, there is very little interest in the debates, except when they are on certain subjects.

Would not it be possible, instead of having these ritual Opposition days, for the Opposition to decide whether they want to have a debate or to raise an issue by some other means, such as putting questions to Ministers, as the Hansard Society has recommended in the past? It would not be quite the same as Question Time, more an opportunity for Members to have longer supplementary questions than otherwise. If I were a Minister and I had a choice, I would rather have a ritual debate than face questions that would not be on the Order Paper beforehand. That is one possible suggestion for trying to liven matters up.

I have considered whether there could be any improvement to Prime Minister's Question Time. It is yah-boo, but it is difficult to find a different format. Back Benchers—and, indeed, Front Benchers, unless they are the most senior Ministers—are unlikely to get much national coverage. I have been somewhat flattered to be told by people who take an interest in politics, and who watch the proceedings at Prime Minister's Question Time and on other occasions, that they have seen me on the screen, and to have received one or two flattering remarks, which, with due humility, I do not take too much to heart.

In other European democracies, as far as I understand it, the Prime Minister of the day—or the President, as the case may be—does not come to the debating chamber in

the way in which we expect our Prime Minister to do. This is not a question of whether he answers questions once a week or twice a week. It is unlikely that my right hon. Friend is going to change the format from that of the previous Parliament. I cannot see any change taking place. It could perhaps be argued that Members on the Government side should ask questions that are not over-friendly to the Government of the day. However, it is understandable that a Prime Minister, knowing that he is to face a barrage of hostility from the Opposition—that is the Opposition's job; it is not their job to come here and flatter the Prime Minister and Government policies—would prefer his Back Benchers to give support. That applies to whomever is Prime Minister, and whichever party is in office.

Mr. Pike: Does not my hon. Friend think it important that the Modernisation Committee should, in this Parliament, examine the art of scrutiny rather than the art of wasting time, and that we should do our job much better in the House and in Committee if that became the prime objective?

David Winnick: I tend to agree with my hon. Friend, but with the reservation that we cannot take the politics out of politics. I ask him to bear in mind what happened with the Treasury Committee in the previous Parliament. One Opposition Member in particular did his utmost to create a situation in which the Chancellor had a very rough time indeed. That Member was doing his duty, and I do not criticise him for that. How can we criticise a Member who feels that that is part of his responsibility? We cannot even, therefore, take the politics out of the sittings of Select Committees. Of course, there is more opportunity for scrutiny and, in many cases, they are not dealing with the most controversial topics. I take my hon. Friend's point on board.

I would like to suggest—although there will clearly be no promotion for me as a result—that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister should take up the recommendation of the Public Administration Committee that he should give evidence on the Government's annual report once a year to the Liaison Committee. So far as I understand it, the Prime Minister argues that no other Prime Minister has done so. He is right, but there is no reason, in my humble view, for him not to do so. It would provide evidence that he takes Parliament seriously, which I am sure that he does, and he would be engaging in an innovation that would only strengthen Parliament.

Anything that marginalises this place or makes it seem irrelevant is extremely unfortunate. I was speaking today to a local reporter who came up to interview the three Members who represent the borough of Walsall. During that interview, I said that one of the greatest blessings that this country had ever had was this place. Anything that undermines our authority, takes away more power or marginalises the House of Commons is extremely unfortunate. That is something that the Government should take on board.

I should like to make a further point on internal matters, which might be somewhat controversial. I am not happy about self-regulation in relation to financial allegations against Members. It is rather invidious for judgment to be passed on our colleagues in that way, and even more so on our party colleagues. This is not a criticism of the all-party Standards and Privileges Committee, which did an

excellent job in the previous Parliament. I have no reservations at all about saying that. However, it is interesting to note that, in certain cases, when its report was being debated in the House of Commons, it almost became a party issue. Allegations were made of a kind of party bias, despite the fact that it is an all-party Committee and that all its reports in the previous Parliament were agreed unanimously.

Is self-regulation really the best way of dealing with these matters? If doctors on the General Medical Council or dentists sit in judgment on someone who has allegedly committed a misconduct, I assume that a panel member who knows the person concerned will not sit on the panel, but will withdraw from it. However, Members of Parliament know everyone here, and I suggest that this is yet another matter that needs to be looked at.

I am concerned that the work of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards has been criticised. Whisperings have got into the national press that she has too much power. She is a servant of this House and it could be argued that, far from having too much power, she should have more authority. My suggestion that a copy of our annual tax returns should be sent to her met with little enthusiasm from other Members. Why? We have nothing to hide.

The Government have undoubtedly provided a full programme for this Session. A large majority of our constituents, especially mine, are likely to benefit if much of what is outlined in the Queen's Speech comes about. I shall therefore have little difficulty in supporting Government measures.

On the reform of public services, however, let me simply say that I shall have to see what is being proposed. I do not take the view that the public sector is somehow inferior to the private sector, and that the private sector is automatically better. One can hardly argue that the trains run better since privatisation and that Railtrack is an excellent organisation. It is hardly evidence that the private sector has a great deal to teach the public sector. I shall keep an open mind and watch the position carefully.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): My hon. Friend talks about keeping an open mind about the balance between the public and private sectors. Will he similarly keep an open mind about the third sector—the possibility of more co-operation? I have in mind the Harmony co-operative, which is the out-of-hours GP co-operative that operates in north-west London. Is there not a case for extending such initiatives across the country, helping to modernise our health service provision and improve services?

David Winnick: As I said, I shall keep an open mind. My hon. Friend will know that that is my usual way of dealing with matters, especially controversial ones.

The Queen's Speech does not say clearly what the Government intend to do about hunting with dogs. Unless they provide Government time, there is no way that the matter can be finalised. I am totally opposed to hunting with dogs. The House of Commons has made its position perfectly clear. This is a controversial subject, and those opposed to legislation will, quite legitimately, use every Commons device to ensure that it is not passed. If the Government are serious, they must provide Government time; otherwise, the matter will continue from Parliament to Parliament. I hope that it will not and that it will be finalised.

[David Winnick]

I totally disagree with what the leader of the Democratic Unionist party said: our horror of the crimes and atrocities committed by the IRA and the loyalists is second to none. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) has no monopoly on that. Throughout the years—certainly, when Labour was on the Opposition Benches—we have made our position perfectly clear. There was no shilly-shallying. We denounced the crimes and atrocities, as those hon. Members who remember the situation will bear out. The Good Friday agreement seeks to stop the horrors that have taken place over the past 30 years.

I am afraid that the hon. Member for North Antrim would never agree to all-inclusive government in Northern Ireland, no matter what degree of decommissioning took place. The remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who used to be Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and who did a very good job in that position, outlined clearly what needs to be done. I welcome the support again given by the Leader of the Opposition today to the Good Friday agreement. It would be most unfortunate if a large majority in this House were to undermine or oppose that agreement. It is the only way in which the people of Northern Ireland can live in a normal democracy.

7.24 pm

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil): I am proud to be a new Member of the House of Commons and to follow the thoughtful speeches of the hon. Members for Walsall, North (David Winnick) and for Banbury (Tony Baldry).

I am only the seventh Member of Parliament for the Yeovil constituency since 1892, so it seems that my constituency has a good record in holding on to its Members of Parliament. I hope that I can convince my constituents to maintain that in future.

I suppose that one of the main duties of any new Member in his or her maiden speech is to make some polite and complimentary comments about his or her predecessor. When one has overturned somebody from another party to gain one's seat, that can be a testing process. For me, however, it is more straightforward because I have taken over from Sir Paddy Ashdown—soon to be Lord Ashdown, I believe. Sir Paddy has played a leading role in United Kingdom politics, both in this place and outside it. He was an effective leader of the Liberal Democrats for a decade and was a leading national politician who stood up for many issues. Some of them were unpopular at the time, but they were great issues of principle.

In spite of Sir Paddy's high profile nationally, he is particularly remembered in Yeovil for his contribution as a constituency MP—for 18 years as MP and for some 25 years as MP and prospective parliamentary candidate. I have had the pleasure of shadowing Sir Paddy over the past couple of years and have seen what an incredibly hard-working and effective constituency MP he is. His basic values of honesty, integrity and hard work are an example to all of us in this place. During the election campaign, I was provided with an answer to those sceptical individuals on the doorstep who are inclined to ask whether politicians are simply in politics for

themselves. Sir Paddy has never been in politics for himself, and many thousands of people in the Yeovil constituency have benefited from his hard work over the years. To that extent, it will be extremely difficult to take over from him.

While shadowing Sir Paddy over the past couple of years, I learned to my cost of the high standards and hands-on work that he has done in the constituency. Last year, when we had severe flooding problems throughout the south-west and other parts of the country, I recollect receiving the usual early-morning telephone call from him and the suggestion that I actively involve myself as soon as possible. I assumed that that meant going to the areas that had been flooded, identifying the problems and firing off some letters to the relevant authorities to make sure that the issues were dealt with in the future. It turned out that Sir Paddy had something far more practical in mind and that the usual Ashdown approach to such matters was to put on his wellington boots and a chunky jumper and to help those in such a dire predicament to remove the furniture from their homes. He has been a hands-on constituency MP in every sense. While nobody can be a blueprint of their predecessor—some sort of carbon copy—I hope that I can maintain the high standard of service to my constituents in the years ahead.

I wish to mention three aspects of the Gracious Speech. The first relates to the reason I entered politics in the first place. I became interested in politics some 20 years ago, when we had severe economic problems and high unemployment in the late 1970s and early 1980s. When Sir Paddy was making his maiden speech in 1983, he described a situation in which unemployment in his constituency stood at 7.6 per cent., which was quite low at that time, but youth unemployment was closer to 30 per cent. That horrendous figure reflected the many problems throughout the country. They were not only economic problems but extended to every area of social life and our ability to raise money for public services such as education, health and public transport.

It is a great pleasure to arrive here some 20 years later to discover the progress that recent Governments have been able to make in reducing unemployment. That has been done to such an extent that Yeovil has a current unemployment rate of around 1.5 per cent., one of the lowest in the country. Although there is clearly much more to do in many constituencies in black spots to bring unemployment down, that is a great achievement and the Government are right to ensure that the highest priority throughout this Parliament is to keep the stable economic conditions that are in place and that will allow the economy to grow and, we hope, provide moneys that can be put into public services to improve them.

Secondly, on the state of such public services as health and education, pensions and public transport, I must be somewhat gloomier than the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) who earlier defended the Government's record and, to some extent, their reputation on those matters. My experience from the Yeovil constituency is that there is still dissatisfaction with the progress that the Government have been able to make so far. Although we may be able to detect some slight upturn when we study the minutiae of the figures available, our constituents cannot as yet identify improvements in policing, the national health service, schools, pensions and public transport.

I can recollect individuals, even today in a country such as ours, having to wait more than two years for a hip replacement operation, as the hon. Member for Banbury also said. One individual in Chard came to me recently with precisely such a problem, having waited two and a quarter years for a hip replacement, ending up in a wheelchair having to take large amounts of pain killers each day. That ruined her quality of life and it must be extremely expensive and inefficient for the health service.

Although there has been some progress on schools and education, we still have higher secondary class sizes in my constituency than we had in 1997 and we still have pensioners on pensions that are far too low. There is a great deal to be done in those respects and I fear that the measures in today's Gracious Speech do not necessarily live up to the challenge of the next four years.

Labour Members have recognised that by the time of the next election they will have been expected to have made great progress in those areas. Given the cash that is going to some areas and the reforms that the Government are contemplating, I am not convinced that the Government have today put in place the measures that will be necessary to bring about the sea change in public services that people are expecting. Given their record in the previous Parliament of acting too slowly, the Government should be extremely cautious about leaving those matters too late.

A grander issue, and one that we have all no doubt faced on the doorstep at some stage during the election, is the euro. Obviously, a great deal of attention will be paid in this Parliament to whether we have a referendum on the euro. I was pleased to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Banbury from the Conservative Benches, which seemed to show a slightly more mature and sophisticated approach to the European issue than that advanced from those on the Conservative Front Bench in the past few years.

However, I detect concern among many of our constituents, not so much on the economic issues but on the political issues that surround the euro. That is why the Liberal Democrats have been so keen to advance the notion of a constitution for Europe that would both define and limit its powers. It would ensure that it involved itself in the big issues that many people in this country understand it should be involved in, such as the environment, trade and even foreign and defence issues, but it would keep it out of others, such as taxation and even much of social policy, about which the House should be free to decide. I hope that the Government will play their part in Europe in the next few years by putting such reforms centre stage. I suspect that they are the reforms that will be necessary before the Government can win a referendum on the euro.

Finally, the motto of the town that gives its name to my constituency seems particularly relevant to the work that Sir Paddy Ashdown has done in the past few years. If hon. Members will excuse my Latin, it is "*Industria, virtute et labore*", which has been translated for me as meaning, "By diligence, courage and hard work." That is a good tribute to Sir Paddy Ashdown. That motto very much characterises the work that he has done in the Yeovil constituency in the past quarter of a century. I will try to live up to those standards in the years to come.

7.34 pm

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): I rise in my place with some trepidation, having just emerged from the murky shadows of the Government Whips Office. Therefore, I have some sympathy for those with a maiden speech to make. The hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) need have no such fears, however; he gave a confident and a competent parliamentary performance. He did not entirely follow the expected convention of being uncontroversial, but he need not be too concerned about that as exactly the same criticism was levelled at me by Sir Giles Shaw from the Dispatch Box 15 years ago. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has a difficult act to follow, as he observed—following a party leader who is still a prominent national figure—but he shows all the signs of being a credit to his predecessor and I am sure that he will also be a credit to his constituency.

I welcome the Loyal Address and in particular the stated intention to improve further our health and education services, as well as public services in general. There is much in the speech to celebrate, but there are also some omissions, not least of which is regional government, a subject to which I will return.

First, I must mention some specifics to which I hope the new Government will pay urgent attention when they introduce legislation. I hope that a system of licensing and regulation of the private rented housing sector will be introduced. Too many people have their daily lives disrupted, their environment damaged and scarred and their quality of life destroyed because of the antisocial behaviour of a minority of tenants. Councils have some remedy for that and take action from time to time to deal with the problem, but I hope that the Government will find ways to help councils to deal even more effectively with such people. Similarly, housing associations try—not too hard, I often find—to influence matters under their control. If the Government can do more to encourage effective intervention by those organisations, I am sure that thousands of tenants will be grateful.

Private absentee landlords are a different matter, however. Some of them are fine and they try to run their properties responsibly, but too many are content to sit back and count the rent that is coming in—often from housing benefit—and do not care two jots about the behaviour of their tenants, the condition of the property and the effects on the local community.

I hope to see the introduction of properly regulated tenancy agreements, which all private landlords must provide when letting and which they must be responsible for enforcing. I want agreements that would oblige tenants to act reasonably towards their neighbours and to keep the surroundings of the property in reasonable condition—agreements to prohibit the dumping of rubbish in gardens or the curtilages of the property and the putting out of waste in unsuitable containers that dogs and cats can tear open and scatter about the neighbourhood. I also want local authorities to be empowered and resourced to ensure that rented property is kept in reasonable condition—inside and out—and that landlords are meeting their obligations under the regulations and in accordance with the tenancy agreement.

Local government was another glaring omission from the Gracious Speech. Incidentally, I am not saying anything here that I have not said inside the tent, as it were, which may go some way towards explaining why

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I am now outside it. Sometimes, attitudes to local government in this place are appalling. When some people are elected to Parliament—often with little experience of much outside their own limited spheres—they seem to think that they have been elected because they possess a superior intellect or have suddenly become fountains of knowledge and wisdom. They bleat on about democracy and yet they seem to think that, even though councillors are also democratically elected, the Member of Parliament's mandate is somehow the only legitimate one.

Although the general structure, duties, responsibilities and overall expenditure of councils are, of course, legitimate areas for Parliament and the Government to decide, the extent of interference by Whitehall in what should be local matters and the patronising finger wagging by Ministers—of all Governments—are sickening. Ministers would do well to be a little more humble in their dealings with people who are also elected and who know their area, their duties and their responsibilities.

I suspect that hon. Members on both sides of the House will have found, as I did, during the recent election campaign that local councillors were the people on whom we most relied to organise and to help. We would do well to remember that and to appreciate the vital contribution that local government makes to our democracy and to the standard and quality of life of our fellow citizens on a daily basis. I also hope that we will soon take a new look at how local government is financed. I regret that the Loyal Address made no mention of that.

The current system of standard spending assessments—another Tory brainwave—is discredited and unfair. The population basis of calculations is too simplistic and fails properly to take into account the different needs and demography of an area. We have to look at new ways of financing local authorities, which will give them the flexibility to respond to local needs and demands and which properly recognise the values of locally based and accountable services.

I well remember my days as leader of Gateshead council—a position that I was proud to hold. I remember the relationship between the council and the private sector. There is nothing new in councils engaging private sector companies to do sometimes major works. Local authority relationships with private companies led to many problems in the past, but the way in which the relationship is being dictated by the Government now is undermining morale among councillors and public sector workers. It seems to some that the old adage "Public sector good, private sector bad" is being turned on its head by the Government. The Government should gan canny on this, to use a familiar Tyneside expression. Efficiency must not mean cheapness or cuts in wages for low earners, which is all too often the result of private sector involvement in the delivery of services, as opposed to capital investment.

With the proper safeguards, there can be a healthy relationship between the public and private sectors, but the Government have yet to show that they fully appreciate the strength of feeling on the matter, let alone the dangers to the public services involved. Public services will not improve if staff and local representatives are undervalued and demoralised.

Regional government was touched on by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Joyce Quin). I much regret the absence of any reference in the Queen's Speech to devolution, save for the curious statement:

"My Government maintains its commitment to devolution in Scotland and Wales."

I was not aware that there was any doubt about the Government's maintaining their commitment to devolution in Scotland and Wales. Why is it necessary to leave out any reference to England? That is a mystery that I hope will be cleared up soon. Is there any significance in the fact that no references are made to the Government's commitment to London or Northern Ireland? The inclusion of that sentence in the Gracious Speech leaves many questions unanswered.

It is the case, of course, that the Gracious Speech does not contain the entirety of the Government's intentions over the whole Parliament or even the whole Session, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister pointed out. Other speeches will be forthcoming and, as Her Majesty put it:

"Other measures will be laid before you."

However, some of us believe that there is now some urgency on the issue of regional government. Devolution is a process, not an event, and we will be pressing for clarification of the Government's intention on the continuation of the process.

Indeed, there is a need for much clarification on regional policy—not least the division of responsibilities between Ministers and Departments. If, as I hope, regional government remains on the Government's agenda, who will be in overall charge of taking it forward? Which Department will be responsible for which aspects of policy and policy development? We need early answers to those questions. The issue will not go away, and the regions of England will not be sidelined, and certainly will not be ignored.

All Governments have recognised the administrative advantages of dividing England up into regions. For example, regional structures were put in place during the first and second world wars, and regional economic planning councils were put in place by the Wilson Government in 1964. The Kilbrandon report in 1973 recommended the creation of regional co-ordinating and advisory councils, part-elected and part-nominated. A previous Conservative Government set up regional offices to co-ordinate the activities of the regional arms of Government Departments, headed by a single civil servant with considerable power and influence. Labour has, of course, retained regional offices and supplemented them with regional development agencies, and encouraged regional chambers made up of community leaders to provide a quasi-democratic element.

Now that major constitutional reforms are in place, with the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly and a new Assembly for Greater London, it is time to move on. The new Government must complete the work. The reconstitution of the Standing Committee for the English Regions is welcome, but by no means a substitute for regional government. We shall have to wait to see how often the Committee is to meet and to what extent it is able to influence regional issues. Perhaps an all-party group on regional government, independent of the Executive, would be better placed to give vent to

Back-Bench contributions on the subject. I shall discuss that with colleagues, but in the meantime we should give the Standing Committee a reasonable chance to prove its usefulness.

The new Government must take early action to correct the anomaly that devolution has created. There can surely be no justification now for Scotland and Wales having their own Secretary of State sitting in the Cabinet, influencing things on their behalf, when they have their own assemblies. One Cabinet Minister for the nations and regions would suffice and I hope that that will be forthcoming soon. As long as the current system remains, the English regions, especially regions such as the north, are further disadvantaged.

I do not intend today to call for the immediate abolition of the Barnett formula, although I believe that in due course the system of financing the nations and regions will have to be reformed. Some of those who call for the abolition of the Barnett formula, or the provision of a Barnett formula for the north, are joining those who make the rather simplistic assumption that abolishing the formula would somehow benefit the north or that the Government are likely to extend it to one region and not the rest. I want what is right for the north, not what is right for Scotland, Wales or London. That must be based on a proper assessment of needs and resources, not on petty jealousy of what some other area gets.

I have no doubt that such an assessment would benefit the north-east, but the general quality of life is good in our region. We have a lot to offer and to be proud of and, given the resources and the flexibility to use them to our best advantage, we can go a long way to resolving our own problems and extending quality living to all our citizens. The Labour party in the north has long campaigned for regional government in England. The proposal from some that there should be an English Parliament flies in the face of cultural and historical development and would leave northern regions dominated once again by the more wealthy and highly populated south.

Governments past and present have accepted the wisdom of creating and maintaining a regional structure in England that recognises the cultural and economic development of distinctive areas of the country. The time is right for that to manifest itself in properly accountable regional government that will not take powers away from local government nor be conditional on the restructuring of local government within its area. However, after the regional structure has become established, there could be a duty on the new regional government to report to Parliament within a specific time scale on the structure of local government within the region. It must be government with teeth, with the powers and resources to make a real impact on the economic and structural problems that the region faces.

Regional government in the north would give us direct influence in Europe and a strong, collective voice to promote our virtues and enhance our image in a way that central Government and local authorities cannot. It would give us the ability to pursue regional priorities that fit with regional aspirations, not the priorities as they are perceived in Whitehall.

What will a regional assembly look like? It will be democratically elected by the people of the region. Its members should think regionally and not consider

themselves representatives of a specific or geographical area. The system of election to the assembly should therefore reflect that principle. It will be small enough to be efficient yet large enough to be properly representative. That will form the directly accountable, decision-making assembly. However, its structures should be inclusive and encompass local government, regional business, the regional TUC, further and higher education, the voluntary sector and so on. It will be financed by central Government grant and the taking over of central Government's functions in the region. It will not have direct tax-raising powers.

Those who oppose regional government often say that it will be yet another tier of government, that it will be costly or that it will provide more jobs for the boys. I refute all those arguments. We are the most under-represented country in Europe. The 1974 local government changes cut the numbers of elected councillors by half. The previous Tory Government abolished metropolitan counties and the Greater London council. The introduction of regional government—a common form of government in the rest of Europe and throughout the world—will go some small way to redressing the cuts in democratic representation.

The truth is that our people are now ruled by quango—small groups appointed by and accountable to the centre. Regional government can replace much of that, so it need not place substantial additional financial costs on the taxpayer. Indeed, there are real opportunities for cost savings through regional government. Furthermore, as much of the responsibility of the regional tier will be transferred from existing central Government responsibilities, there should be no additional costs arising there either.

The "jobs for the boys" point should be directed at quangocracy, the little huddles of the great and the good who sort out who will be chairman of this or member of that—posts that often bring generous salaries for very little work. Such people are completely unaccountable to the local people whom they are supposed to serve.

We are proposing a big change; these are matters that deserve detailed debate and discussion on both sides of the House. The time is right for us to move forward to the next phase of devolution. English regional government is at least part of the answer to the West Lothian question. It will promote innovation and variety in the governance of our country. It is right for the UK and it is certainly right for the north.

Devolution is a process for the whole of the United Kingdom. It cannot be implemented in part or in a piecemeal fashion if it is to work efficiently and to full advantage. That is why regional government is a natural and necessary next step, but it can be only part of a holistic approach to modern government. It should be complemented by and associated with another constitutional change that will also be crucial to the development of efficient and modern government in the United Kingdom: the completion of reform of the House of Lords. Thankfully, that was mentioned in the Gracious Speech.

The House of Commons is directly elected by the people and so must reign supreme. The second Chamber must be accountable and representative yet remain a "second" Chamber. For that reason, I oppose a directly elected second Chamber. Direct elections would confer

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the same legitimacy to Members of the second Chamber as to MPs, possibly resulting in opposing mandates and bad government.

How then can we create a second Chamber with legitimacy and authority that would contribute to good government? How can we create a second Chamber that would have weight, would command respect and would have the confidence to challenge Government but, in the final analysis, not be able to frustrate the mandate on which the Government were elected? Just as the House of Commons represents the people, by direct elections, the second Chamber should represent the structure of society, by indirect elections. To the second Chamber, or perhaps the "House of Representatives", would come the representatives of business, trade unions, religious organisations, the voluntary sector, regional assemblies, the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, local government and other appropriate sections of society.

Such a structure would create a House of representatives with wide experience and expertise—an assembly of men and women from a broad cross-section of society, accountable to their sponsoring organisations, and who could properly scrutinise legislation without pursuing an overtly party political agenda. Such a House would complement and enhance the policy of devolution. It would be a House finally free of the hereditary principle and of prime ministerial patronage. A second Chamber so constituted would command the confidence and respect of the British people; it would have a proper, useful role and would be an efficient and welcome addition to our constitution.

I have already gone on longer than I intended. No doubt that is a result of four years of purdah in the Whips Office. I spent six years in all in the Whips Office and that taught me about the frustrations of hon. Members when one Member drones on ad nauseam—I think I am getting close to that point. However, I hope to return to these and other issues in due course. In the meantime, I welcome the opportunity to return to the Back Benches.

7.53 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): I wholeheartedly congratulate the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) on his splendid maiden speech. I remember making my maiden speech to a packed House, because at that time it used to be a great occasion and the Chamber was often full. I made my maiden speech on the rate-capping measure. I followed the former right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup. Strangely enough, the right hon. Gentleman was not in favour of rate capping—I took a different view. It was noticeable that the hon. Member for Yeovil was entirely in tune with his predecessor in that constituency and was right to pay a warm tribute to him.

The hon. Member for Yeovil impressed the House with the command of his understanding of issues in his constituency. I certainly was extremely impressed that he used no notes. I shall not try to kid anyone that I am that clever—I have bits of paper all over the show in case I forget what I am saying.

The hon. Member for Yeovil made this a special occasion. No doubt, the Whips will be telling the 96 or 97 new Members to make their maiden speech quickly. That is bad advice. The only time that the House will

really listen to what hon. Members say is when they make their maiden speech, so I am not in favour of throwing that opportunity away when there is no one to listen to it. I say to the hon. Gentleman, "Well done!"

If we had fought the general election campaign on the basis of today's Gracious Speech, God help us all. In every sense, there is an awful programme before us and I shall deal with it in detail in a moment. However, I want to talk about the general election campaign. It was a rotten campaign in every sense.

I shall share my personal experiences with the House. In my former constituency, I was used to fighting the Labour party—this is not a dig at the two Liberal Members in the Chamber—but in my present constituency, I found it a new experience to be fighting the Liberal party. Four years ago, when I spoke on the Gracious Speech, I felt somewhat discomfited because I had been sitting on the Government Benches and when one suddenly finds oneself in opposition it can be somewhat discomfiting. I do not feel like that today. I have got used to being on the Opposition Benches although I do not enjoy it and I very much want my party to return to government.

I have also got used to the way in which the Liberal party fights general election campaigns. In particular, I have got used to the little charts that they put through letter boxes; I have got used to the *Focus* newspaper and being told not to let dogs mess on the footpaths and not to drop litter. I have become very used to the Liberal style of campaigning.

During the general election campaign, the hon. Member for Southend, West was told that he should find another job, because it was, apparently, a two-horse race and I did not figure in it at all. It was a straight fight between the Liberal candidate and the Labour candidate. I have found out that the Liberal organisation wrote to all declared Labour supporters telling them to vote tactically in Southend, West. As the Liberals saw it, there was a straight fight and they were in pole position to take the seat.

I can say only that that backfired spectacularly on the dear Liberal party. Not only did the Liberals lose votes—more than 6,000 votes—but they are no longer even in second place; they are in third place. The Labour candidate at least had the good grace to say at the declaration that he deplored the technique of tactical voting. He said loudly that if one stands for a political party one jolly well votes for it. This place will improve when hon. Ladies and hon. Gentlemen have convictions and tell the general public what they believe in. I applauded the Labour candidate who deplored tactical voting. I suspect that the Liberal charts and claims about two-horse races will no longer happen.

I found myself in a state of shock at the count because I had obtained the largest majority ever during my time in politics. We managed to treble our vote. If any of my Conservative colleagues are feeling depressed about the general election result, let them come to Essex! The tide has turned for the Conservative party in Essex. I may bait the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) to join me and to share his views on the situation. In Essex, we achieved splendid results. In Southend, it was quite clear that the general public wanted no more of this rotten Labour Government supported by the Liberals; they wanted a Conservative Government, so both Southend Members were elected with substantial majorities.

It gets better. We had the council elections. The Labour and Liberal parties did not fare at all well in those elections. The Liberals used to be the main opposition in Southend—but no longer. The Conservatives were elected with a huge majority. As for Essex county council, there was an interesting technique at presidential questions: a Labour member would bowl gentle balls to the leader of the Labour party about how badly Conservative-controlled Essex county council were administering education, transport, and other matters. That obviously did not work, because Essex county council is no longer a hung council in which the chairman has the casting vote; there is now a substantial Conservative majority. So my right hon. and hon. Friends need not feel too gloomy about how the Conservative party did in the general election, because we did very well in Southend.

The only thing that was troubling me when I went to my count was the knowledge that, at the start of the general election campaign, I had recklessly agreed to do a charity abseil down the side of the Cliffs pavilion. I am told that the abseil has attracted a record number of subscribers, on the basis that any number of people are keen to see the hon. Member for Southend, West break his neck. I do not intend to break my neck on Sunday and create the need for a by-election.

I shall now consider the Gracious Speech. We heard that the Government's central objectives were

"economic stability . . . investment and reform in public services, leading to a more prosperous and inclusive society."

I did not hear the leader of the Labour party tell the House what that inclusive society was all about, but I can tell him that the people who are not included in the Labour party project are the working classes. Labour despise the working classes now. One has to be posh to be a member of the Labour party these days. If the Government are serious about creating a more inclusive society, the first people that they need to include are the working classes in the United Kingdom who did not vote.

It is a disgrace that this rotten Government were elected by only one in four of the general public. Why are people not voting? A person from the media asked me what I thought the low turnout was all about. This is the media asking Members of Parliament why we have a low turnout! Elements of the media have undoubtedly denigrated Members of Parliament, lowering their standing in public esteem.

I, for one, wholeheartedly blame the Labour Government, especially their leader, for what has happened in this country. They have tried to americanise our politics. They have announced outside the House things that should have been announced on the Floor of the House. They have trivialised our proceedings. They have turned their own Back Benchers into a crowd of lemmings. However, as a result of the reshuffle that has taken place, we may hear increasingly from Labour Members of Parliament how they feel about the 20 Bills on which the House will be deliberating over the next 18 months.

It is a disgrace that we have followed the United States of America, and voter apathy is the winner. We are the mother of Parliaments. People from all over the world admire the standing of this place, and yet it has been reduced to a second-rate Chamber. I am disgusted about that. I hope that Members of Parliament will be honest with themselves and that we shall all quietly reflect on the matter, and then not just talk but do something about it.

We were told in the Gracious Speech that the

"Government's main priorities for the forthcoming Session will be reform in education, health, crime and welfare."

Have they just suddenly become interested in crime, welfare, health and reform of public services? What on earth has been going on for the past four years? This is drivel.

We are told by the Labour Government that it took four years to sort out the public finances. That is codswallop. There was nothing wrong with the public finances when Labour won in 1997. The truth is that they did not have a clue what to do when they became the Government. They did not know how to run the health service. They did not know how to run education. They did not know how to deal with crime and disorder. Yes, they talked about an integrated transport system, but they certainly have not delivered one. It has been a disaster, and as Members have knocked on people's doors during the election campaign they have learned at first hand the general public's perception of all these issues.

We were told in the Gracious Speech that the

"Government will introduce legislation to reform education."

How many Members of Parliament who spoke to teachers on the doorstep were told, "David, I am glad that you are here. The Government are doing a fantastic job in reforming education. The 1,099 circulars really are the answer to education, education, education"? No, teachers did not say that. They said, "David, our morale is at rock bottom because we have a nannying Government who haven't a clue about what they want to do in education other than interfere." So when I read details about how the Government are going to reform education in this country, I think, God help the teachers who work, day in, day out, trying to inspire our children to get involved.

I wonder how many hon. Members went to mock general elections in schools. Even that was not on the agenda this time. I started in politics by standing in the mock elections in 1964 and 1970.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): For which side?

Mr. Amess: For the Conservative party, of course. That was in Newham.

It is a joke for this rotten Government to suggest that they are going to reform education. That is not what I wanted to hear. What about all the youngsters who do not go to school? Where is the solution from the great person who leads the Labour party? What about all those 14, 15 and 16-year-olds who are not in school? What will the Labour party do to encourage them to return to the classroom?

I think of Government circular No. 1099, which destroyed the Labour support in a local secondary school. A headmaster expelled two youngsters because they were caught taking drugs, but this ridiculous Government's circular says that a pupil cannot be expelled unless they are caught selling drugs. Can you imagine, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Government actually allowed a circular such as that to be taken as a panacea for our educational ills? The past four years has destroyed morale in education and I hope that morale will not be destroyed any further.

We are told that the

"Government will introduce legislation to reform health services."

[Mr. Amess]

That must be the biggest joke ever. Two right hon. Members have had a go at reforming the health service, and it is an absolute disgrace. In Southend at the moment, we have just one consultant psychiatrist, thanks to this rotten Labour Government, and when I knocked on one or two doors I could see that there were a few problems there. We have closed our two local mental health centres, in Westcliff and Shoebury.

During the general election campaign—as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said—very interestingly, the increase in waiting list figures was not announced until the Friday, and this rotten Government, the day after the election, say, “We shall not have waiting lists any more. It is all going to be about waiting times.” My goodness, I cannot wait. I will volunteer to serve on the Committee that considers the health Bill. I opted out of the last one, but I cannot wait to get cracking on this one. We can read in *Hansard* all the quotes by Labour Ministers, saying that we should take no notice of waiting times because it is all about waiting lists.

I heard the hon. Member for Walsall, North (David Winnick), who has left the Chamber, say how arrogant the Conservative Government were. Well, my goodness, what about the arrogance of this Government? This Government have taken no notice of the medical profession, and my fax machine is already full of the letters from the British Medical Association. When Labour Members were in opposition, they used to pray in aid the BMA. Well, the BMA now says:

“The major obstacles in the path of better care for patients do not require legislation, they require investment in the training and employment of more clinical staff and a commitment to modern, fair contracts for consultants and GPs.”

First, this crazy Government upset the consultants by imposing on them a six-year contract, with an option of an extra year, which will not work. Those consultants are needed to run our health service, but the Government have completely alienated them, and they have now turned on the doctors and the general practitioners. For the first time ever, GPs in this country are going on strike in July. The Conservatives cannot be blamed for that; it is what four years of this rotten Government have done.

The Royal College of Nursing was always used in support by Labour party activists, but today it has said that “the key issue for the NHS is the urgent need to recruit and retain more nurses. The Government has set a highly ambitious target of 20,000 extra nurses. This will only be achieved if there is real sustained action not only to recruit nurses but to ensure that those in the profession stay.”

Nothing that the Government have done in the past four years will restore morale in the health service, and all hon. Members know, from knocking on doors, that morale is absolutely rock bottom.

We are told in the Gracious Speech that

“Legislation will be brought forward to help the police fight crime”.

This Government helping the police fight crime! My goodness, we heard at first hand during the election campaign what a high regard the police have for this rotten Government. Again, as a result of the Government’s mismanagement during the past four years, pay and conditions are the biggest police morale issues. In 1979, when the Labour party was thrown out of office

and the Conservatives had to sort out a terrible mess, we immediately implemented the Edmond Davies report, restoring morale to the police force. Yet again, this arrogant Government have not listened to anything, but they say that they will help the police.

Mr. David Taylor: The hon. Gentleman talks of sorting out the mess, but does he include—or pray in aid, as he would say in his overblown rhetoric—the rotten doubling of crime under the Conservative party when in office?

Mr. Amess: The hon. Gentleman is entirely wrong about the Conservatives’ doubling crime. He should reflect on the fact that fighting crime in this country is not helped by the Government releasing half the criminals early. Can hon. Members imagine anything more stupid than going through all the expense of court cases when those found guilty go to prison for increasingly short times?

We are told in the Gracious Speech that

“A draft Bill to create a single regulator for the media and communications industries and reform the broadcasting and telecommunications regulations will be published.”

It is not modern or popular for people to cast themselves as Christians, but all hon. Members are only too well aware of the campaign to provide a dedicated channel for Premier Christian broadcasting. We are all aware of the letters that we have received from Ministers, basically saying that we cannot have such a dedicated channel.

Mr. Pike: That cannot be done because of Conservative legislation.

Mr. Amess: The hon. Gentleman says that, but we have had a rotten Labour Government for four years, so it is about time that we heard about Labour legislation if the Conservatives were so wrong. I have no influence with the Government, but, as a matter of urgency, I ask those Labour Members who now feel freer than they did during the previous Parliament—perhaps they have some influence—to press for a Christian radio broadcasting frequency.

We are told in the Gracious Speech that

“Following consultation, [the] Government will introduce legislation to implement the second phase of House of Lords reform.”

That shows how crazy the Government are. They are telling us in the Gracious Speech that a Bill will be introduced to outlaw foxhunting. I shall share a secret about the Government’s game with my recently elected hon. Friends. We shall debate foxhunting, and I am one of a small minority of my colleagues who vote differently from the rest, but there will be a huge majority in favour of banning foxhunting. The Bill will then go to the House of Lords, and all the Labour Members will say, “Well, what can you expect of the House of Lords? It’s a complete anachronism. It’s stuffed full of Conservatives.” That will not wash any more, because the House of Lords is stuffed full of Labour cronies, and I can name one or two of them who are totally pro-foxhunting, so it is nonsense to suggest that we cannot deal with foxhunting without reforming the House of Lords, and I will not buy it.

We are told in the Gracious Speech that there will be legislation

"to allow political parties to make positive moves to increase the representation of women in public life."

Well, was not it a wonderful spectacle when a Labour Minister deigned to open her mouth at a press conference during the general election campaign? The media had asked where the Labour women were in the general election campaign. Of course, none of them was to be seen, and two of them were immediately slapped down when they tried to say something during a press conference. I have never met a lady who needed men to fight on her behalf. When we had a woman as leader of the Conservative party and as Prime Minister, this country had its finest hours. I have no problem with more women being elected to the House and having them as leaders, but we need no help from this rotten Government to get women back into Parliament.

However, I agree with one of the measures in the Gracious Speech—that on adoption. I had a few words to say on the previous Bill. It will be a splendid measure. It is crazy that a huge number of babies and children cannot be adopted because of all the bureaucracy involved. I speak only for myself, and certainly not for my party, but I hope that we back the Government on that issue so that the measure quickly reaches the statute book.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Yeovil on his maiden speech, which seems a long time ago now. My colleagues should not be downhearted about the result of the election campaign. My hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh (Mr. Francois) is now in his seat, and we had a splendid result in Essex, and I include you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as your constituency is in Essex. Once again, Essex will lead the Conservative party back to victory and on to the Benches opposite.

8.18 pm

Mr. Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): A key theme of the Queen's Speech—indeed, it was the dominant theme of the general election—is the need to create high-quality, world-class public services. It is clear that the electorate rejected the Conservatives' approach to public service, and it is not difficult to understand why. Teachers and pupils had a long recollection of the year-on-year cuts in school budgets, and patients, carers and those who use the transport system knew only too well the consequences of privatisation. Everyone rumbled the fact that tax cuts, however unspecified—£8 billion, £16 billion, £20 billion or £30 billion—would lead to cuts in public services.

It is also clear that people have high expectations of the new Labour Government. I looked with interest at the commitments on public services in our manifesto, which says that

"we seek to achieve a renaissance of status and quality for public services and their staff."

It goes on to say that we will create a Britain

"where investment is now pouring into public services".

We must deliver on those promises and build on the good start that we made in our first term.

Over the past three years, the budget of Nottingham health authority rose by about 5 per cent. in real terms. Since the last year of the Conservative Government, its budget has increased by £185 million to £462 million this year. School budgets have also increased in

Nottinghamshire. Compared with last year's budget, this year's has increased by 6.1 per cent. School budgets have increased every year since the 1997 general election. What is more, we have a sound economic platform for greater investment in public services—in hospitals and schools—over the next three years.

There can be no alibi for failure in our second term. We will have been in power for eight or nine years and we must make a difference to the public services that have been mentioned tonight. However, there is a curious paradox, which has interested me for many years, before and during my time on the Government Front Bench. We are investing more in public services, but the people who work in them have, by and large, low morale. I have heard that denied, but my experience in surgeries, hospitals and schools and with the police force suggests that there is a crisis with regard to the people who work in the front line of public services. Unless we can improve morale, enthuse and involve front-line staff and make them real stakeholders in the provision of services, the rhetoric of creating high-quality, world-class public services will be just that—rhetoric.

I want to examine how we got to this position and, more importantly, what we should do about it. The first problem is the danger that the large sums of money that are being put into public services have been overinflated and have raised the public's expectations. Hon. Members will remember that in our first spending round an extra £40 billion was made available for health and education. However, when worked out on a year-on-year basis, that gave growth of just 3 per cent. Over the next three years we are promising to put a third extra into the national health service—the biggest cash increase that it has ever received. However, there are many different priorities and we need to be clear that we might raise the expectations of consumers and, more particularly, raise too greatly the expectations of the people who work in our public services.

We have had a decade of under-investment in public service. In the previous Parliament, the Government increased the money available, but that is like a sponge mopping up water; it takes time to turn things around. Let me give a classic example. The number of police officers fell for eight years under both Governments, but it began to grow for the first time last autumn. We are in a position to invest 5 to 6 per cent. more, year on year, in public services. We need to ensure that that is translated into service improvements on the front line.

The second problem is that when we came into power in 1997 after 18 years out of government, we were keen to do so much that we concentrated on quantity rather than quality. For example, one of the key spending Departments in the previous Administration had 50 top priorities. Clearly, it was impossible to deliver them all. One message for our second term is that we must focus our priorities and concentrate on quality rather than quantity. If we can deliver services well, with our stakeholders, it is clear that morale will increase and we will have made real improvements.

A third aim, which is an absolute priority, is to involve the work force in our public services so that they help to set targets and timetables. After all, people who come into public services are like politicians; they want to make a difference, to serve the people in their community and to make services better for their kids and their children's children. Unless we involve the providers of public

[Mr. Paddy Tipping]

services—the people who are close to the consumer—there is a danger that our initiatives will be out of touch with the needs of the customer or consumer. When that has been achieved, it has been a tremendous success. When the cheque for school standards money goes directly to head teachers, it is most welcome. I have talked to ward sisters who have a budget of their own and feel more in touch with their destiny. We should do more of that and translate the rhetoric of the devolution of finance and decision making into reality.

There will be consequences. Although we might set targets from the centre, if we trust people on the ground to deliver, they will find different ways to resolve issues. They will find different local solutions to a shared problem. Things will happen differently in Brighton, Birmingham, Bristol, Nottingham, Nuneaton and Newcastle. Instead of being anxious about that, we should celebrate it. There is a belief that all public services have to be delivered in the same way, but that is clearly a fallacy. We must ensure that public services meet the needs of local communities and when, as a consequence, a local solution is different from what the Government want, we must be mature enough to accept that.

Mistakes occur in all large organisations. It is a fact of life that things go wrong. Public services have been disabled by the fact that when that has happened we have far too often been critical rather than supportive. Politicians have a tendency to call for a public inquiry when there is a problem, but we must consider the facts and learn lessons. We must also acknowledge that the people working in those public services have been doing their best. As a Government and as management, far too much of our focus has been on failure. The other side of the coin is the need to identify and promote success. There is a lot to be proud of in our public services. We have not achieved our aim of using education and health action zones, where interesting changes are taking place, to inform public services throughout the country.

If I am right to argue that the focus has been on failure and that we ought to concentrate on the positive and to reward success, that has implications for our inspection and regulatory bodies, such as Ofsted, the Audit Commission and Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary. I have always argued that the Audit Commission ought to be called the "Quality Commission". Instead of number crunching and looking at the nuts and bolts, it should identify good practice and use those practitioners to roll out good practice throughout the country.

Until recently, Ofsted has been an absolute disaster. If one body has had a destabilising and dysfunctional effect on public services, it is Ofsted. It is now under new management, with a regime that has a lighter touch, and I hope that we can make progress. The lesson that all Governments need to learn from the Ofsted experience is that naming and shaming is dysfunctional and destructive, and the way to improve public services is to be proud, positive and rewarding. High-quality, world-class public services will be achieved only if we use all the resources at our disposal.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland), I see nothing wrong in principle in using the private sector, but the issue is why and how we will do it. There are strong arguments to be had about that. We must be careful to get away from the old Thatcherite

legacy of "private sector good, public sector bad". We know that if we look for good and bad management, we will find examples of both in the public sector and in the private sector. Bringing in private sector management, allegedly to reform our failing public sector schools and hospitals, could prove to be more dysfunctional than it is worth. We need to be clear that the role of bodies such as Ofsted and central Departments is to look for and promote good practice.

It makes sense to strengthen central Government and to reinforce the Cabinet Office. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston) is right that we need to set targets, but the process by which people reach those targets is a matter for a more local level. We can be absolutely certain that change in public services will not be delivered by central Government—by people in the Cabinet Office. Substantial, meaningful change that will affect our constituents will occur only if the people who work on the front line are involved and enthused.

I have not set out a prescription for the health of the NHS, and I am not giving lessons about investment in education. I am keen to stress a straightforward management point, a truism. If we are determined to make change, the people who can make the change—the change agents—are the doctors, nurses, teachers and head teachers, and the police officers on our streets. If we cannot excite and enthuse them, and make them part of our crusade to adapt and improve public services, we face real dangers and the possibility of failure.

I am conscious that this is work in progress and that unless we involve the work force we will not make progress. Unless the stakeholders really are involved, our commitment and desire to create world-class, high-quality public services will be in doubt. The challenge before us is to make the change to ensure that the people who work for us and our communities are fully engaged and supported in the task.

8.35 pm

Norman Baker (Lewes): I put on record my congratulations to my new colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) on his very good maiden speech. He will undoubtedly be a useful Member. His speech was relatively short—the shortest of the debate so far—and that might be one reason why it was particularly good in comparison with those of Members who have been in the House longer, including myself, who have a tendency to ramble on at some length. [Interruption.] One is not heckled during one's maiden speech, but that courtesy does not of course apply to what might be called my second maiden speech.

I congratulate the Government on their re-election and on the considerable achievement, to which the Prime Minister referred earlier, of a full second term for a Labour Government. Historically, we should recognise that as a significant achievement. Concern has been expressed by Members of all parties that it was secured on a vote of only 25 per cent. of the population. We can trade figures about how few votes the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats received, but it is of genuine concern that the vote was down. Undoubtedly, one reason was that we were told by the media that Labour would win, and therefore there was no point in voting, as the election had already been decided.

A second factor is the way in which we conduct ourselves in this place. We have a Modernisation Committee—my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) has turned up on cue for my mention of it—but we did not modernise far or fast enough in the previous Parliament. I hope that we will get a move on in this new Parliament. One reason why we have to legislate to introduce more women MPs is that, with debates continuing long into the evening, this place remains very unfriendly to them—as it does to all of us with families.

Another way of increasing turnout would be to introduce proportional representation—a fair voting system, so that votes count. The hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), who made not perhaps a rotten, but certainly an eccentric speech, denounced tactical voting. Tactical voting would not be necessary if we had a fair voting system. It becomes necessary because people cannot make their vote count for the party of their choice. They have to vote for a second best in some cases. That happened in 1997 and again in the most recent general election. If we had PR, tactical voting would disappear overnight. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's conversion to a commitment to a fair voting system.

The hon. Gentleman is, of course, a great addition to the House. I remember going round the London Eye with him not long ago. We started at the bottom, went round in a big circle and ended up where we started. Perhaps that is a metaphor for his political career as well as for mine.

Although voting at the election was down, I am particularly pleased that the turnout in my constituency was 68 per cent. That is not nearly enough—only two thirds of voters—but a lot better than in many seats, where turnout was less than 50 per cent. Although my speech cannot really be a second maiden speech, I hope that the House will indulge me when I say, first, how privileged I am to be back in this place and, secondly, how privileged I am to represent a constituency of the beauty and diversity of Lewes. It is a fantastic constituency.

The issues that my constituents want me to deal with are predominantly local. Members have not referred to local issues much in this debate. National issues are, of course, important, but we all have our base in our constituency, which we forget at our peril. Local issues are of key importance.

Issues important to my constituents include, for example, making sure that the Government deliver proper flood defences and provide money to ensure that Lewes will not again be subject to the terrible flooding that occurred in the county town last year; making sure that plans for an incinerator at Newhaven are stopped, and that the investment that has been taking place in Newhaven port continues so that it becomes one of the premier ports of the 21st century; and making sure that the new rail franchise operator, GoVia, does a better job than Connex, and that we get decent services and cheap rail travel.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood): we will not get people out of their cars and on to public transport until we have a decent public transport system. We have not achieved anything like that in the past four years, nor have moves been made to achieve it; instead, there has been a continuation of the failed privatisation of the rail industry, with Railtrack apparently wanting ever more Government money. I, for one, object to handing out lots of taxpayers' money to a private company for, in effect, no return—but that is what

has been happening for the past four years. I shall go off-message, and say that if we are to hand out lots of money to the railways, the industry should be under some sort of public control, instead of in its current position.

What are the Government going to do with their big mandate? Labour had a big mandate in the previous Parliament, but did not do as much with it as some of us would have liked. If I have one major criticism of the Government of the past four years, it is that they were too timid. They had that mandate, but appeared to suffer from a lack of intellectual confidence in their policies. After 18 years in opposition, during which time the Tories had seized the agenda and done lots of things that were quite popular—for example, selling council houses and dealing with the unions, as in Mrs. Thatcher's early years in power—there was genuine uncertainty about how far a Labour Government could go in their first four years while continuing to command public support. After all, the 1997 vote was not for Labour or for the Liberal Democrats; it was a vote against the Conservative Government, whose time had expired and who had to be removed at all costs. The result was that the previous Labour Government were timid and lacked intellectual confidence. In consequence, they adopted far too much of the Tory agenda and far too many Tory policies that should have been ditched or binned because they were time-expired.

In his eloquent speech, the hon. Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) said how important it was that local government be returned to local government. I agree that councils, too, have mandates and that we need to make progress in regionalisation, but the fact is that we now have a continuation of the flawed policy of Whitehall control, standard spending assessments and the arrangement whereby Ministers hand out money to local government bodies only if they jump through the correct hoops at the right time. I am sorry that that is still going on, and that there is nothing in the Queen's Speech that gives me confidence that the policy will change. That part of the Tory agenda should have been ditched, and it still needs to be ditched.

Notwithstanding the comments of the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping), with whom I largely agreed, it should be said that there remains a residue of the school of thought that holds that the private sector can automatically do things better than the public sector. I do not share that view. In the 1980s, Mrs. Thatcher said "Private good, public bad," and I think that that thought runs through the current Prime Minister's mind. Let us think about the notion that improvements in the health service and the education system can be achieved only by bringing in private money and private management, and adopting the private finance initiative route. I am not saying that such a policy is necessarily wrong—perhaps it will work—but it is not the only solution.

We have good people in the public sector, and we should ask those people what their solutions are before we give in and bring in people from outside. To be frank, the outsiders we have brought into other sectors have not been a great success—just take a look at Railtrack. What a disaster that has been. We were told that only the private sector could run the railway system and that British Rail was a disaster. In fact, the bottom line that has emerged over the past four years is that British Rail was less of a disaster than Railtrack has been, so we should not draw such conclusions.

[Norman Baker]

There has been timidity, but I hope that, having achieved a second term and so overcoming an important mental hurdle, the Government will be less timid and truer to their beliefs. They have the mandate and the majority. I hope that they will use them to do some of the things in which they believe, rather than continue to hang on to the policies pursued by the Conservatives during their 18 years in power.

There is a more insidious problem. It is the job of government to do the best for every citizen of the United Kingdom. It is especially the job of government, as the primary representation of democracy, to ensure that centres of vested interests and power outside the democratic system work, so far as possible, in the interests of the citizen. Government should put pressure upon them wherever possible, and work alongside them to achieve the right result. Laws should be introduced to curtail them if necessary. Government should stand up for the individual against large vested interests where those interests do not work for the individual, and generally they do not.

That is where the Government go wrong. I do not know whether that is because intellectually they do not agree with my argument, or because they are too timid to take on large vested interests that should be tackled. Too often the Government duck the issue.

For example, President Bush is behaving outrageously, and in a way that most right hon. and hon. Members would find reprehensible. We are not sure whether he wants to pollute the planet to death or to bomb it to death. Either way, we should be saying, "I'm sorry, we do not agree with you, for the following reasons. You are wrong." I hope that the Government are taking that approach behind the scenes, but I am not convinced that they are. They should be saying to the United States Government, "We shall stand four-square with our European Union partners on Kyoto. That is where we shall stay. We don't buy this. We shall not follow you just because you have sold out to your oil interests." That should be said firmly.

We should be saying to President Bush, "Be very careful about national missile defence. Be careful before you untie all these treaties, before you destabilise Russia, before you invite adverse comments from China and before you throw everything up in the air and see where it lands. Because you have sold out to your defence interests, we should not sell out as well."

We have a real opportunity to control the issue, because the Americans need to use bases in the United Kingdom. They have to use Menwith Hill and Fylingdales. We can stop the use of our bases if we have the courage to do so.

Will we have the courage to take an approach that will mean a rough ride for the Government because we upset one of our allies, or will we take the easy option and go along with it, and pretend that that is all right? I hope that the Government will take the rough option, which is the right option.

Will the Government take the rough option with the big petrol and oil companies? Members may have seen the story in *The Sunday Times* about an MI6 offshoot effectively being used to spy on Greenpeace at the behest of Shell and BP. I do not know whether the Government

knew about that. I hope that they did not. If they did, that is outrageous. It is something that needs to be stopped and reined in. Greenpeace has a right to stand up for what it believes in, in a lawful way, and Government agencies should not be used in such a way.

Many Members have received representations from independent petrol retailers, many of which are being driven out of business disgracefully by the big oil companies, which have vertical integration. They sell themselves petrol to sell on the forecourt more cheaply than the independent stations can buy it. Independent retailers have to buy petrol at a higher price than it is being sold at by the big companies, such as Esso, on their forecourts. The objective is to drive the independents out of business.

The Government are committed to competition. The Chancellor of the Exchequer made great play of that earlier this week. If he is genuinely keen on competition, let him take the rough road and take on the oil companies. Let us protect the independent petrol retail sector—or will the Chancellor take the easier road and let it disappear?

Will the Chancellor take on big business and take the rough road in other ways? The House will be aware that 75 per cent. of groceries are sold by four supermarket chains. That is far too high a percentage, and is out of line with the rest of the developed world. Only 20 buyers, representing the largest food manufacturers, determine how 25,000 farmers will farm, and what they will produce. Only a handful of biotech companies—most of them not British, but American—are determining that GM crops should be grown in this country and placed on shelves.

Will the Government take the rough road and challenge these things in the interests of the individual, or will they give in, take the easy route and say, "Forget about it and turn a blind eye, because that way we'll have less trouble with the electorate and the media"?

Is the Chancellor going to take the rough road with people such as Bernie Ecclestone and introduce legislation to ban cigarette advertising, or will he forget about it and hope that nobody notices? Most of all, will he take the rough road with Rupert Murdoch and follow the words of the former Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who is now out of a job, and who recently said:

"If the only people the government listen to are big business, that's a problem".

We have heard about the communications White Paper. There has been a delay, and only a draft Bill will be published. That is very serious—the Government need to get a move on.

Will the Chancellor take the rough road and tell Mr. Murdoch, "The Government are interested in the issue of cross-media ownership and want diversity in the media. I am sorry, you've got too many newspapers"? Or will he say, "If you give us a nice easy ride on the euro, Rupert, we won't do anything to your newspaper holdings"? Will the Chancellor take the rough road and challenge Mr. Murdoch, or will he take the easy road and let him cop out?

The Government need to help the individual by taking on those vested interests; they must take them on when they have to. That pays. Mrs. Thatcher took on the unions when she was Prime Minister, and everybody—or nearly everybody—in the House will agree that in the 1970s and

1980s, the unions had excessive control, their vested interests were not helpful and their power needed to be trimmed. Whatever people think of Mrs. Thatcher, most think that she was right to do that. I therefore hope that the Government will take the rough road, which is in the country's interests. If they do, they will get support in the longer term. It may be difficult for them in the short term, but it will be better in the longer term.

What is our role? The role of individual MPs is important for our democracy. As individual MPs, we must make sure that, first, we represent our constituents and deal with constituency issues to the best of our ability. Secondly, we must hold the Government to account; that applies not simply to Liberal Democrat and Conservative Members, but to Labour Members, who are not Lobby fodder, but are elected to hold the Government to account, as Opposition Members are. I very much hope that they will do that. Like all of us, they must judge the Government on their actions and respond accordingly. We do not want people to be corralled by the Whips Offices into taking a position with which they may not agree—that is another reason for making the House more reasonable and accountable to people out there. We want a bit more independence in the House; that applies to all parties.

I am sorry that Martin Bell is not back, regardless of which seat, in Essex or elsewhere, he contested. I am glad that we have an MP for Wyre Forest who has a different perspective on life. I have no idea what the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) will be like, but he is a new MP with a different perspective. That is great; that is diversity. We do not want just three opinions representative of the three parties expressed regularly and monotonously in the House. We need an independent streak, and must make sure that people are free to speak their minds. We must make sure that they are free to speak against their party when they feel that it is important to do so, even if that means that they upset their party and suffer as a consequence.

I disagree fundamentally with the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), who seemed to elevate loyalty to a religion with his suggestion that people should be loyal to the Labour Government. That is an outrageous suggestion, especially from someone who has as much experience of the House as he does. Especially with a big Government majority, the onus is on Labour Back Benchers to make sure that the Government are humble and listen. The hon. Member for Walsall, North (David Winnick) was right to make exactly that point in his speech.

In my view, in the past four years, Labour Back Benchers, with notable exceptions—including the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay), who is sitting opposite me—did not hold the Government to account in that way and did not take risks. They were much too prepared to vote for things in which they did not believe, and went into the Lobby to vote for legislation that, as they told me and others afterwards, they thought was wrong. However, they still went through the Lobby; if they are to avoid voting against the Government, they have got to find a way of stopping legislation getting to that stage. That is the way it has to be done.

Back Benchers and all Members of Parliament need to be courageous. We must avoid having as Members people who are time servers and people who make speeches and

ask questions because they want a job. We must make sure that the bumpy road is taken by the Government, and by individual Members in the House.

8.54 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): I was intrigued to hear the speech of the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), because as he spoke I realised that we had something in common. Like him, my sister used to live in Basildon, and I notice that my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) has just walked in.

In rising to make my first contribution in the House, I am keenly aware that I am only the fourth individual since the second world war to have had the privilege to do so as the hon. Member for Cardiff, West. The first of those four was to national prominence as Secretary of State for Wales and then as the occupant of your Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when he became the first Speaker in history to be broadcast. Although it was at first in sound only, his distinctive Welsh voice became for a while the vocal emblem of the House. He was, of course the late George Thomas, subsequently Viscount Tonypandy.

There then followed a brief historical blip in the history of Cardiff, West when the voters returned a Conservative Member, Stefan Terlezki, between 1983 and 1987, in an election that, given the current state of the main Opposition party, seems a long time ago.

My immediate predecessor, however, was Rhodri Morgan, who served on the Front Bench for much of Labour's period in opposition, notably as shadow Minister for Welsh Affairs during the development of Labour's devolution policy. He also holds the distinction of helping to make the Cardiff Bay Barrage Bill the most debated measure in the House's 800-year history, eclipsing even the debates on the corn laws. That included one contribution that lasted two hours 40 minutes. Hon. Members can rest easy in the knowledge that that is one thing that I do not intend to match in following him in the House.

After the 1997 general election, Rhodri Morgan served the House as Chairman of the Select Committee on Public Administration, where he enhanced his reputation as a man of principle and courage in pursuit of the truth. Hon. Members may not be aware of the Welsh saying, *tri chynnig i Gymro*—three tries for a Welshman. That does not refer to Scott Quinnell's efforts for the Lions rugby team in one of the recent tour matches in Australia, but it certainly was true in relation to my predecessor's campaign to become Labour's First Secretary in the National Assembly for Wales, a position that he holds today with distinction.

Rhodri Morgan was known in this House for his verbal dexterity, Welsh wit and skilful debating talents, and is credited as one of the few politicians to have ever left Jeremy Paxman lost for words when he was asked on "Newsnight" if he would stand for the leadership of the Labour party in the Welsh Assembly and he replied

"Does a one-legged duck swim in a circle?"

Rhodri Morgan will be an extremely difficult act to follow, not least because he is so relentlessly tall, an unusual trait in a Welshman and one that I am sure hon. Members will have observed that I do not share. At well over 6 ft, with added inches for his trademark hair, he represents a towering political figure in the most literal sense, and the Welsh Assembly's gain is this House's loss.

[Kevin Brennan]

My constituency of Cardiff, West is the area of our Welsh capital city bounded roughly by the River Taff to the east, the London to Swansea main railway line to the south, the Cardiff bay link road to the west and the M4 to the north.

It could be tempting to follow the precedent of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) who, in his maiden speech at the beginning of the previous Parliament, described how many points of interest lay just outside his constituency, since from within my constituency there are magnificent views of the new Millennium stadium located just the wrong side of the river Taff in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones), and there are fine views of Castell Coch, the beautiful fairytale castle creation of William Burgess situated just the other side of the M4 in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North (Julie Morgan). In addition, there are views to the new developments in Cardiff bay, south of the railway line in the constituency of the Minister for Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Alun Michael).

Fortunately, I do not have to follow that precedent. Cardiff, West contains its own jewels, including three sports stadiums—Sophia gardens, which I am told you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will be certain to know is the home of Glamorgan county cricket club—Leckwith athletic stadium and Ninian park, the home of the sleeping giants of British football, Cardiff City. Sadly, they have been sleeping giants since 1927—talk of the dead—when they won the FA cup. These days, Cardiff holds the FA cup once again, but only in the sense of having the final in the Millennium stadium.

There is also Llandaff cathedral, the ancient seat of Christianity in south Wales, the Chapter arts centre, one of Britain's foremost centres for the contemporary arts, and St. Fagans museum of Welsh life, Wales's top tourist attraction. The museum was recently boosted further by the very wise concession on VAT made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The concession has enabled the Labour-led National Assembly for Wales to introduce free admission at all Wales's national museums.

We are proudly cosmopolitan in Cardiff, West, just as Cardiff itself has long been a cosmopolitan city, built on its role as the world's largest coal-exporting port at the end of the 19th century. Thus, many languages can be heard in Cardiff, West, including Welsh, Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati, Somali and even the language that is usually spelt "Kairdiff"—the distinctive local dialect of Cardiffians, which some say has Irish inflections mixed with the musicality of the Welsh.

The Queen's Speech follows a remarkable election for the United Kingdom and also for Wales. I referred to the Lions rugby team in Australia. It is noticeable how readily the rugby fans of Wales have ardently shown their support for the Lions, despite the domination of the squad by players from England whose team is temporarily stronger than the Welsh one. That is the spirit in which Welsh voters, while intensely proud of their Welshness, rejected the narrow confines of Welsh nationalism at the ballot box. It is also the spirit in which I and, I am sure, the seven other new post-devolutionary Welsh Labour Members will operate in the House.

In overwhelmingly supporting the Labour party, the return of a Labour Government and the manifesto reflected in the Queen's Speech, Welsh voters also rejected the main opposition party. Prior to 1997, the Conservatives had returned Members for Welsh seats at every election since 1906. Now, for the second election in a row, there is not a single Conservative Member in the House who represents a Welsh constituency. The roots of that continuous, contiguous Conservative-Cymric cull lie in the contempt with which Wales was treated by the Conservative party when it was in power. Its current leader, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), was the last in a long line of Conservative Secretaries of State for Wales who did not represent Welsh seats. In my view, he was probably the best received of the bunch, because at least he learned the words of the Welsh national anthem, unlike the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who spoke earlier.

In the Queen's Speech, the Labour Government have set out their first steps for a second term. Time and again during the recent election campaign, I came across people who want to see this Government succeed. They want them to succeed in restoring quality public services—in Wales, that will be done in partnership with the Welsh Assembly—and they want them to succeed in helping pensioners, in the fight against crime and in providing investment and hope in estates such as Ely, in my constituency. They want the Government to succeed in their mission to promote social justice and prosperity as two parts of the same goal, and to restore together with the Assembly the national health service, which was created out of the instinctive pragmatic socialism of the people of south Wales. That is why I welcome the specific promise in the Queen's Speech of a draft Welsh Bill on health.

The voters whom I met want us to govern on the strong values of Labour: fair play, or *chwarae teg*, as we say in Wales; looking after one's neighbour; giving a fair chance in life to everyone; making sure that crime does not pay, but that work does pay for those who can work; and helping those who cannot help themselves. Those are the themes that the Government have outlined in the Queen's Speech.

I am the product of a mixed marriage between an Irishman from the green fields of west Cork and a miner's daughter from Nantyglo in the Gwent valleys. My father is a man of many sayings, two of which have come into mind since I entered the House. The first relates to the many opportunities for liquid relaxation that appear to be available to hon. Members in this place. My father always says in his Irish brogue, "Two is plenty; four is only half enough." I commend that advice to hon. Members. The second saying relates to the values that I hope to follow and that I am sure Labour will follow in setting out its vision for Britain in the next five years. My father's credo is this:

"Help the weak against the strong
Love the old when you are young
Own a fault when you are wrong
When you're angry, hold your tongue."

I shall endeavour to follow the advice that I first heard in my father's house during my time of service in this House.

9.4 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): The hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Kevin Brennan) displayed assurance, some articulacy, occasional alliteration and glimpses of poetry. He will be one of the stars of the Parliament. He has the sort of speaking talent that probably guarantees his joining the Whips Office and being shut up for a bit. I am sure that the tributes that he paid to his three predecessors in Cardiff, West will be much appreciated by the two who are alive and the families of all three. Hon. Members who remember George Thomas know that if the hon. Gentleman follows his lead as advocate for his constituency, he will create a reputation that means that those who follow him will pay the same tributes to his merit.

The last maiden speech that I followed was that of the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble). I said that he had the talent to go on to lead his party. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Cardiff, West will do that. Perhaps other new Members will challenge him for that role. I hope that he enjoys his time in the House. I am sure that his constituents will be pleased with the service that he provides here.

I want to deal with several issues. I shall begin not with the contents of the Queen's Speech, but with an urgent message that I received from one of my constituents. Her partner of five years has been in this country for approximately 10 years. He has reported to the police station every month for several years. Today, he was held without notice in Littlehampton police station. He was then taken to Worthing police station. He may have been moved elsewhere without being told the destination. The Home Office believes that it sent letters to him and his solicitor in September. I shall give the reference numbers of the case in case someone in the Home Office wants to look it up. The Home Office reference is S 804065; the court reference is CEU/98/392.

I do not know whether Mr. Gerard Santos had the right to be in this country. However, someone who reports month after month, year after year to a police station should not be held without notice even if the Home Office believes that it sent a letter nine months ago. Is it Home Office practice to send letters by recorded delivery? Does it know whether the letter arrived? Mr. Santos was known to have been in this country for some time. Hon. Members should acknowledge the Home Office's difficulty in managing people who may be here legitimately or are perhaps overstayers. There may be many reasons for the Home Office's actions. I do not know the details, but I am not satisfied that Mr. Santos and one or two other people in Worthing have received fair notice of what they were expected to do.

If Mr. Santos has the right to remain in this country, it would be good to know that. If it is believed that he does not have that right, I should like to know what notice he has received. Does the Home Office believe that its procedures are working? Has there perhaps been a pile-up during the election campaign? Have people suddenly been told to produce figures to allow the Government to claim that they are being firm and fair about overstayers and people who apply for the right to remain in this country? I do not prejudice the facts, but it is unsatisfactory that a constituent has to contact me to say that a person whom she has accompanied to a police station month after month has suddenly disappeared into official hands.

I want to present the civil engineers' report card on the previous Parliament. We are often willing to talk about high politics, but not about independent assessments of the Government's rating in the past four years on, for example, railways, local roads and transport, trunk roads and motorways, water, flood defence, energy, urban regeneration and waste.

The Institution of Civil Engineers and *New Civil Engineer* magazine have produced a report card. Their gradings range from A to E; A is good and B is fair. Every rating for the categories that I outlined is below B—they are all Cs and Ds. The overall rating is C-minus. The card states:

"Four years of promises and consultation . . . have started to deliver infrastructure. But progress remains woefully slow."

It outlines the various aspects that have led to that. It continues:

"The huge number of policies and plans must continue to be converted into action and cash for new and improved infrastructure."

The new Government should now have the confidence to take bold action to help utilise the private sector's enthusiasm and available finance, particularly in rail and local transport."

The House knows that one of my brothers-in-law runs a railway, but I am not making this point on his behalf; I am making it as a general one, and on behalf of the civil engineers. Their report goes on:

"Local authorities must be given clear incentives to set radical congestion busting policies. The industry must continue to invest in training to increase skills and efficiency. The UK still needs effective leadership to tackle growing waste and energy problems."

I agree with that.

I do not want to get into party political bickering over infrastructure, but I found it slightly peculiar during the election to see the Prime Minister go to a hospital in my old constituency—the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Woolwich—to give himself a lot of praise for the private finance initiative. As I recall, the local Labour party opposed that hospital taking over from the Greenwich district hospital and the Brook hospital. It even opposed the use of the private finance initiative for a car park. To see Labour, some years later, showing that it has changed its view and that it understands how private sector finance can help in terms of infrastructure for public use is a charming turnabout.

As I have explained to some of my constituents, the Labour party has pinched many of the Conservatives' ideas over the past few years, and it is almost certain over the next three or four years to adopt those it opposed during this election. One set of ideas that I would commend to Labour Members relates to the Home Office. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) proposed a number of ideas in January about supporting the victims of crime, so that they can be kept up to date with what is being done by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service.

On many occasions, my constituents—and, I suspect, those of other hon. Members—are left totally in the dark as to what is going on. Things can get very complicated in some cases. I was involved with one yesterday, in relation to the Justice for Jay Abatan campaign, in which someone is a victim, a witness and a member of the family of a victim. In such a case, it might be difficult for the police and the CPS to be as open as they would otherwise be.

[Mr. Peter Bottomley]

In less-complicated cases, it is vital that the police and the CPS keep the victims in touch with what is going on. There could be much more movement to ensure that the victims and their families are kept separate from the accused during trials. I do not want to prejudge people's guilt, but as a matter of common courtesy and decency, people should not have to go through, or stay in, rooms in which they would be side by side with the accused or those closely associated with them.

I pay tribute to Sussex police, who held a meeting yesterday in the market hall in Hove, in Brighton. The Assistant Chief Constable, Nigel Yeo, ran the meeting—which was chaired by Lord Dholakia, the chairman of the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders and a well-known Sussex person—which allowed some of the issues involved in the Sussex police's approach to the Abatan case and the faults of the first investigation to be shared with the general public. That is a sign of confidence. There are other issues to do with the police that I shall take up when the opportunity allows.

I have tabled my first question to the Home Office, asking when the new Home Secretary plans to meet representatives of the National Black Police Association. There has been significant progress in the police's dealings with matters of race in the years since the Lawrence inquiry report, both with the general public and in the way in which they treat their own ethnic minority, black and Asian staff, but there is a long way to go. Some of the issues that I have picked up in relation to the Metropolitan police—and, perhaps, other police services as well—show a degree of failing to approach things in the right way, although "incompetence" is the wrong word to use.

The well-known case of Sergeant Gurpal Viridi illustrates that. A number of us tried to say to the Metropolitan police and the Home Office that things were not going right, without prejudging the issues. These are the same kinds of worries that I took to the then Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis over the Stephen Lawrence murder in the months following that case. There are concerns that are fairly easy to pick up and to which officialdom should pay attention.

Without going into too much detail, I plan to table a series of questions on the case of Superintendent Dr. Ali Dizaei. The investigation into his case has probably used more resources than those used in the investigation into the Jill Dando murder or the disappearance and subsequent murder of Sarah Payne in my constituency.

If the disciplinary charges that Dr. Ali Dizaei potentially faces are as minimal as they now appear to be, leaving aside any justification for such a charge, the level of resources approved at the highest level, which I assume was ministerial, as well as by the highest ranks of the Met, will require some justification after the event that perhaps should have been demanded at the beginning.

I shall not go further into that matter, but I wanted to set out the issue. Unless those of us who are white, male and middle class take up the issues of people who are black or Asian, women or disabled, we are effectively asking the victims to put things right. It is up to Members of this House, who are part of the establishment—with a big or a small "e"—to take those matters on.

Given our position, Members of Parliament have the might. If we know what is going on and are worried about it, it is our responsibility, both in public and in private, not to duck. We must not be afraid. That is the kind of advice that the hon. Member for Cardiff, West was talking about. We cannot always be confident that we are right, but if we do not act when we suspect that things are going wrong, we shall be left with a country in which some of our public services are besmirched.

I turn to one of the most important public services—the health service. I pay tribute, as I did in my speech in the debate on the previous Queen's Speech, to Worthing and District community health council and to its chief officer, Trevor Richards. He has kindly sent me a copy of the correspondence that he is having with West Sussex health authority, which has replied to him saying:

"You are quite correct in your analysis of the GP provision in Worthing when you describe it as requiring urgent attention. The situation at present is that there are no practices south of the railway line with an open list and as a result patients are being allocated on a rota system to practices in turn."

The reasons for that are disparate, but some of them are that Worthing and District CHC has probably the highest proportion of retired people in the country. Moreover, in some GP practices, almost one person in 11 is over 85. Whereas the Government have paid attention to practices in which that proportion of people are over 75, Worthing is 10 years ahead. In effect, Worthing and District CHC shows what is likely to happen in the rest of the country over the next 10 or 20 years.

I believe that it is important that West Sussex health authority, the Department of Health and, for that matter, the NHS executive should ask Worthing to say what is necessary to meet family practitioner needs so that doctors do not break down and so that patients can be seen. While I accept that more and more is being done, more and more could, should and must be done.

The hon. Member for Cardiff, West referred to the concept of the national health service in the light of experiences in south Wales. I acknowledge what he said, but I do not believe that family doctor services in Worthing are acceptable. My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Virginia Bottomley), my wife, says that in her area, of those waiting for in-patient treatment, one in 10 waits more than a year, whereas in the Prime Minister's health authority area the figure is one in 200. Such a contrast may exist for a reason, but it cannot be allowed to continue for any reason. We should try to make sure that people have not a national waiting service but a national health service. I could give a number of other examples.

Let me turn to party politics. I hope that Ministers will go beyond party politics as far as possible. I was present for the speech of the hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston), who, when a Minister, answered in an exemplary way a question that I had tabled. He sent back the first draft answer, asked for more information and then provided more information in public. If other Ministers can follow that example and be as helpful—understanding that Members usually ask a question for a reason, especially if it relates to a constituency issue or a constituent with a difficulty—they will serve this House and the country better. Good examples should be praised and bad ones identified.

We have had an election. One result—the Conservatives having to choose a new leader—may have been necessary. It is clear to me that the best candidate is

my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), who has the qualities of a good party leader and a good Prime Minister. One of the things on which the media should be reflecting is how they have managed to hide some of that from some people. If my right hon. Friend will not stand, I would encourage the Conservative party chairman to do so. I have said that, if nominated, I would stand and that, if elected, I would serve, but I do not think that either is likely to happen.

The Conservative party needs to show that it can promote the ideas of self-reliance and liberty within reason, and the ideas of justice and social justice—as it has done in the past. Justice is not merely law and order—it goes far beyond that into the sort of inclusiveness about which more people are now talking. We should also be friendly. Being sharp-suited and sharp-tongued is not the way to gain the confidence of the majority of people in this country. We need an approach that is as attractive in the inner cities to many of the have-nots as it is to those on the south coast in constituencies such as Worthing, West, which I have the honour to represent.

Finally, we need to be able to show people that politics itself is inclusive. I hope never again to address a large church meeting of 200 people, none of whom had ever thought of standing for elected office, had ever encouraged a talented contemporary to stand or had been part of a selection group to decide, if more than one person was willing to be a ward, a county or a parliamentary candidate, who would do the job best. We must provide that sort of encouragement, and that will lead to greater participation in politics and voting.

9.21 pm

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Kevin Brennan) on their maiden speeches, which I enjoyed and on which I focused very much. I am sure that they will be an enormous and beneficial addition to the House and to its deliberations.

I had also hoped to welcome and wish well the new Leader of the House, but unfortunately he has not been in the Chamber for many hours. I certainly welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), who has only recently been made a Minister and I wish her well. Frankly, there should have been a senior Cabinet Minister on the Treasury Bench. I say that for a good reason, to which I will return. As wonderful as my hon. Friend is, I do not think that she is qualified to respond to a question that I want the Government to answer this evening.

If the Leader of the House had been here, I would have told him that he has the opportunity in this Parliament to re-establish the very radical credentials that were certainly his hallmark for many years. I hope and believe that he can do so and that he will pursue some of the matters outlined in the Queen's Speech with vigour.

I wish to canvass two reforms that have not been mentioned during today's debate. The first is minor. As wonderful as the state opening is—I really enjoy it and I do not knock ceremonial at all—there should be only one per Parliament. It is enormously costly and one must have regard for proportionality, and a Parliament should be a seamless robe rather than having Sessions. Of course, that

would require legislation because we would also want to protect the benefits of the Parliament Acts, which could be altered so that a Parliament is based not on Sessions but on calendar years—we must ensure that the Government can get their legislation through.

Secondly, I believe that we are unique among parliamentary democracies in that, when we have a general election—this was true in 1997, but it was also true even of this election—there is no period of transition. People should not cease to be Ministers in the early hours after a general election. Furthermore, people should remain Members of Parliament throughout the general election campaign. Of course, there should be ground rules as to what they can and cannot do.

When there is a crisis such as foot and mouth disease, for example, people should have a mandate to tackle Ministers and Ministries and civil servants should not be embarrassed in responding. There should be a week or so in which the new Ministry should be confirmed by an affirmative vote of the House. That should be the beginning of the mandates of the new Members and Ministers.

I raise that as a practical point because, as wonderful as the former Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) is—he is a skilled and able man—I do not believe that he can have gone to the European conferences as Foreign Secretary fully and adequately briefed. It simply cannot be done. That diminishes our opportunities and interests. I know that it happened at other times in history. It happened when Clement Attlee had to go to Potsdam, but that does not make it right. Clement Attlee probably was not fully and adequately briefed for Potsdam, and there may have been some long-term disadvantages to the interests of the United Kingdom as a result.

We should think in terms of providing a transition period until the new Ministry is confirmed by the House of Commons. That would be democratically sound. It should not be just the next morning that the new Ministry comes into force and the new Members of Parliament have their mandate. I hope that the Leader of the House and others will think about that.

I also hope that the Leader of the House will pick up the idea that was canvassed in the Queen's Speech of looking again at House of Lords reform. We cannot be tremendously proud of what we did over the past four years. It is true that we diminished the hereditary element, but we have to face the fact that half of our Parliament is unelected.

I listened closely to the good speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland), and I agreed with almost everything that he said. I prefer the idea of direct elections to the upper House. I do not see why it would necessarily diminish the effectiveness and supremacy of this Chamber. However, I would sign up to his proposition that Members of the upper House should be indirectly elected. The fact remains that at present half of the British Parliament has no mandate other than patronage, and some are Members by the abuse of patronage. It is now time that that was stopped.

One bit of business that was unfinished because the general election intervened is the nonsense of people's peers. The idea was not only one of the most silly put forward by the Labour Government but it was wrong. Let us go back a few weeks. We discovered that Sir Herman

[Andrew Mackinlay]

Ouseley was a member of the panel that appointed Lord Stevenson of hairdresser to preside over the commission that would choose the people's peers. He then applied to Lord Stevenson of hairdresser and, surprise, surprise, he was nominated as a peer. By any stretch of the imagination, that is wholly unacceptable. It stinks. I hope that we do not return to the nonsense of people's peers next year. It is outrageous that that should have happened.

We should abandon the nonsense of people's peers and focus on making the other House accountable and elected in some way and on giving it some legitimacy. I was deeply disturbed and irritated by that nonsense of people's peers. As far as I can make out, it was never the subject of an affirmative vote on the Floor of the House of Commons. It was done purely by Executive decision, and it is indefensible.

I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry), who like other hon. Members referred to the disappointingly low turnout at the general election. I agree with him that we need to look at many of our practices. He referred to Prime Minister's Question Time. We must step back from the vacuous nonsense of Prime Minister's Question Time; the sterile debate and the synthetic anger.

Especially on the Government side, but not exclusively, we have to stop the industry of planted questions. I know that people say that it does not happen, but I deliberately use the word "industry". Questions are trotted round day after day. It is unfair to Members who are the architects of their own questions. We go into a raffle, as you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to put a question to a Minister. It is wholly wrong that people take questions off the acolytes of Ministers that are probably written by Ministers. It is simply wrong, and it is unfair to those who take the trouble to write their own lines. It is time that the whistle was blown on that.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: While I understand some of the arguments against the present system, does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that there are two benefits to it? First, Members can raise any real issue in Parliament within three or four days, or a week in any case, and Ministers have to be aware of that. The other is that various Departments have to provide briefings to the Prime Minister on issues to which he might not otherwise give much attention.

Andrew Mackinlay: I hope that the House will note that I did not say that Prime Minister's Question Time should be done away with; it should be more like the Canadian system where Members are called at the complete discretion of the Speaker and which is open to everyone—the whole Ministry attends and can respond. That would be good. Preparation and briefing are priceless jewels: it is the abuse—not only of Prime Minister's Question Time but of other Question Times—that we have to stop. It is essential that we maintain our Question Times—that is vital. However, we must stop the silliness and the abuse—it has not occurred merely in recent years but has been going on for a quarter of a century. It is time that we stopped it.

I revisited my maiden speech, given in 1992, as a checklist for the things I had pursued. I was pleased to see that many themes that I then raised continue through

my activities in the House of Commons. For instance, I welcomed John Major's announcement of his hope that Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic would enter the European Union by the end of the decade. They have not yet done so, but that is not the fault of either the Conservative or the Labour Governments. One of the things of which the United Kingdom can be proud is that Governments have pursued the question of European enlargement. Ultimately, that is a moral issue, although it is also commercial, political and economic. Those countries are entitled to join this organisation of free, democratic states and would have done so but for the disfigurement of Europe by the Yalta conference more than half a century ago. I hope that Her Majesty's Government pursue that matter with the utmost vigour—it is one of right, as well as being in the interests both of the central European countries and ourselves.

In my maiden speech, I also referred to the problems for my constituents and for those in Basildon—now the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith)—caused by the closure of the accident and emergency department at Orsett hospital, which is just inside her constituency. As I then predicted, it has placed an enormous strain on the A and E department at Basildon hospital, which serves my constituents. It is time that the problem was revisited by the Department of Health. I do not know what machinery it has—the equivalent of an Ofsted or whatever. The fact is that the system is not working; there are intolerable and unacceptable pressures on the staff and facilities at Basildon hospital, which covers two urban areas. That is wholly inadequate and can no longer be tolerated. I am not prepared to acquiesce in the matter by holding back—it needs to be looked at. I think that is also the view of my colleague.

A further point is the poverty of the transportation system. I was pleased that, as the Under-Secretary at the former Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Keith Hill) visited the London, Tilbury, Southend line, now run by an outfit called c2c—Cancellation to Cancellation, as we call it. My constituents know that one of the consequences of the crackpot privatisation scheme was a significant diminution of what was already a parlous rail service in my constituency and in those of my hon. Friends the Members for Hornchurch (John Cryer) and for Basildon and for many people throughout Essex.

The service is wholly inadequate. I do not intend to let that outfit off the hook. It is, I think, part of the National Express group. The franchise should be revisited, to consider whether the company should hold it. Indeed, there should be a review of whether the National Express group should be allowed to attract new franchises until it can fulfil both the letter and the spirit of the franchise it entered into for the LTS line.

In my maiden speech, on 6 May 1992, I said:

"I was concerned to read in the press that there could be some shilly-shallying or delay in setting up Select Committees."—[*Official Report*, 6 May 1992; Vol. 207, c. 108.]

It so happens that nothing seems to have changed. Demonstrably, there is some discussion in the press about shilly-shallying in setting up Select Committees. I wish a senior Cabinet Minister was in the Chamber—either the Chief Whip or the Leader of the House, because I want to share with you what I believe is going on, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I hope that, if I do an injustice to the

Government—or the Opposition Front Bench—both or either of them will stand up and give me an assurance that I am wrong.

I tell you what the plot is, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I listened very carefully to the Leader of the Opposition today. He mentioned Select Committees. I listened to every word with precision. However, he did not do his duty and tap and rap on the Dispatch Box and ask, "When will you set up the Select Committees? I demand that you set up the Select Committees." He did not do so because the Conservatives now do not want the Select Committees to be set up until the autumn, after the leadership election. It is perfectly right that they should hold their election, but it should not interfere with the parliamentary process of scrutiny and accountability.

The Conservatives do not want the Select Committees to be set up because some of those people are candidates who, if they cannot be leader of the party, would like to be Chairperson of a Select Committee. There are also people who will not serve on the shadow Cabinet if a particular Member is chosen as leader of the Conservative party. There are some who will not be acceptable to the successful new Leader of the Opposition, and they want the opportunity to parachute in to be a member of a Select Committee or—some of them are very grand—a Chairperson.

I invite the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) to get up—I shall invite the Minister to get up in a minute—and give a categorical assurance, on behalf of the Opposition, that here tonight he demands that the Select Committees are set up this side of the summer recess. I am prepared to give way. Can the hon. Gentleman get off his backside and make that declaration to the House on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition? Of course he cannot. Do you know why, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Because the problem with this place is the cosy consensus between the two Front Benches. Earlier, I referred to the synthetic anger at Question Time. The truth is that it is a carve-up between the two Front Benches. They do not care about scrutiny and accountability.

Now I come to the Government. The Government's plot is to blame the Conservatives. The unspoken, unwritten agreement is that both of them blame each other, but not very loudly. The Government have no excuse. There should be no halt, no hesitation, in bringing forward to the House the process to set up the Committee of Selection and in setting up those Committees before the summer recess. Not to do so will be scandalous for the Government. Bearing in mind our very large parliamentary numbers and the fact that the Opposition are in such a parlous state, we have a duty—a moral responsibility—to provide scrutiny and accountability.

Members of the Fourth Estate know what is going on. Instead of writing acres of print about the boring Tory leadership election, they should be writing about the fact that the Conservative and Labour Front Benches are not setting up the Select Committees.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Collusion.

Andrew Mackinlay: Absolutely.

As a result, hon. Members who want to be allowed to serve on a Select Committee will be on good behaviour until October. That is a very serious point. It also means six or seven months without scrutiny in this place. How

can we possibly defend that? We cannot do so. Even if the Select Committees are set up at the end of July, before we go on summer recess, they will not be able to do much, but they do have the right to sit during the summer recess and if a crisis occurred Committees could sit. The Committees can also prepare their plans for investigations in the autumn, and they will have a Chairperson. But if we kick everything into touch until October, the Select Committees probably will not be in operation until late November.

Is the Minister in a position to say from the Dispatch Box that the charges that I made are wholly wrong, wholly unsubstantiated and unfair to the Government?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Maria Eagle): As my hon. Friend knows, this is not a matter for the Front Bench; it is a matter for the usual channels.

Andrew Mackinlay: I do not accept that. It is a matter for Back Benchers. It is a matter for Parliament. It is a matter of our rights and our obligations to the electorate. I hope that people will pick up on the fact that the Government are colluding with the Conservative Front Bench not to set up the Select Committees.

Finally, I believe that people who give evidence to Select Committees should do so under oath; it should be automatic. People come before Select Committees and do not give true testimony. I also believe that attempts to prevent people from appearing were made in the previous Parliament.

Earlier today, you read out the Sessional Orders, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There was some levity, which I can understand; I was amused about things such as access to Parliament and so on. However, the important point is that you said:

"if it shall appear that any person has been tampering with any witness, in respect of his evidence to be given to this House, or any Committee thereof, or directly or indirectly has endeavoured to deter or hinder any person from appearing or giving evidence, the same is declared to be a high crime and misdemeanour; and this House will proceed with the utmost severity against such offender."

If the House does not accept the need for oaths to be taken, the Sessional Orders should certainly be drawn to the attention of all witnesses in writing before they appear, and they should be so cautioned by the Chairman of the Select Committee. That would produce the sober realisation in witnesses—whether they are public servants, in commerce or Ministers—that they must tell Parliament the truth, that there should be no interference and that no impediment should be placed in their way or attempt made to dissuade them from appearing before Select Committees, as I think has happened in the past.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford) *rose*—

Andrew Mackinlay: Has the hon. Gentleman an assurance for us?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is always listened to with great attention in the House, especially on constitutional and parliamentary matters, and, if I may say so, he is on particularly good form this evening. Would he do anything about the extraordinary system that pertains at present under which the Whips determine who serves on the Select Committees, so that, essentially,

[Mr. Davies]

the Government determine which hon. Members serve on the Select Committees that hold them to account? Is that not an incestuous system? Will he succeed in persuading the new Leader of the House and the rest of his colleagues, who have such an overwhelming majority in this Parliament, to do something about that extraordinary anomaly?

Andrew Mackinlay: First, I was one of the hon. Members who argued consistently about that in the previous Parliament. In fact, I gave the then Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby, South (Margaret Beckett), a lot of aggravation about her not implementing the Liaison Committee report, "Shifting the Balance". On one occasion, I taunted her about the fact that the Government would not set up the Select Committees before the summer recess, which she vehemently denied. Last week, when I tackled a high-up person in my party about whether the Select Committees would be set up before the parliamentary recess and reminded him of the undertaking that the former Leader of House had given, he said, "Ah, that was predicated on there being a May election." That was when I became alarmed about setting up the Select Committees.

I have answered the hon. Gentleman; will he now answer me on behalf of the Opposition? Is he prepared to tell the Government that, regardless of its leadership election, the Conservative party demands that the Select Committee machinery should be set up with vigour before the summer recess? Would the hon. Gentleman like to respond on behalf of his party? I take it that he does not. I have explained what is wrong with the House. We cannot get an undertaking from the Government or from the Opposition, so it is now time for Back Benchers to say, "Enough" and assert that the Government and the Opposition should be discredited for this cosy carve-up of what should be Parliament's role, duty and right.

9.43 pm

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): I am glad to have the opportunity to make a few brief comments. First, I should like to refer to the two excellent maiden speeches. They represent a simple ABC reminder to all hon. Members because they were appropriate, brief and competent. All hon. Members would do well to take note of the way in which they were delivered.

I want to refer to a few things briefly and then to concentrate on a couple of main issues. I welcome the fact that the Queen's Speech states that we shall reintroduce legislation on leasehold reform and international development. That is crucial. I am also glad that we shall do more about secondary education. I wish that we could do more to advise parents of their rights and about preferences, as opposed to choices, in selecting secondary schools for their children. Those two matters are not always the same. If parents state three reasonable preferences, I should like to work towards a position where all parents could be given one of them.

The Government have done an excellent job with the NHS and in education since 1997. I hope that we can carry with us the teachers and others who work in education and the NHS in the next four or five years because that is crucial.

I am glad that we will return to the issue of hunting with dogs. One young girl in my constituency echoed the views of the many thousands of people who find it incredible, given the public support for banning hunting and the large majority that that commands in the House, that an unelected, unaccountable House was able to block legislation on it. We should not let that happen again.

Although there are many international situations in which we must work towards peace, we need to play a leading role in Kashmir. However, we cannot solve the problem without the help of the people of Pakistan, India and Kashmir itself. The issue needs to be kept on the agenda and we must do what we can to find a solution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) made an excellent speech. I agreed 100 per cent. with what he said about regional assemblies, so I shall not go into detail on those. I also agreed with the way in which he would form the second Chamber, whatever we want to call it—the House of Lords or the House of representatives. I advocated the same formula for representation in that Chamber.

Two other constitutional matters need our attention. First, if we move towards elected regional assemblies, we need unitary local government throughout the country. We need to get away from the ad hoc hybrid system that is left over from the procedure introduced by the previous Conservative Government. Secondly, as a member of the Modernisation Committee, I believe that we have a great deal to do on modernisation. We need to ensure that scrutiny of legislation is top of the agenda if we are to make more progress than we did in the previous Parliament.

I want to concentrate on two issues that have been touched on. The consultation on reform of local government finance needs to be advanced. Although I was not a candidate in the 1979 election—I was not elected until 1983—the Tories, who won, said that they wanted to set the town halls free, but instead they immediately shackled them by introducing legislation and cutting finance. We forget that the poll tax was accompanied by a cut in the national expenditure to fund local government. That trend has continued year after year. We need to ensure that local government can do the job that it is elected to perform.

Every authority—in my case, Lancashire county council—is squeezed for money for social services. More money is needed if those services are to be provided. Two thirds of Burnley's property is in council tax band A. That is too much and the banding widths need to be changed. However, that alone will not solve the problem. Burnley also inherited many assets, such as parks, museums and sports centres, that were donated by benefactors over many years. They are supported by the public, but cost a lot of money to provide and we are in severe difficulty. Burnley district council, like many other local authorities, took part in painful exercises earlier this year to see how its budget could be used to provide essential services in the area. The limitation of the council tax benefit subsidy unfairly penalises many areas where there is a high rate of benefit dependency. We need to consider that problem.

Burnley has lost much as a result of the withdrawal of the revenue support grant from the council over the years. It is the only district in England with a standard spending assessment that is lower than it was when the poll tax ended in 1993. In 1992-93, the SSA was £11.7 million; it

is now only £11.5 million, despite inflation of 27 per cent. over that period. If it had increased with inflation, council tax would be lower and we would be able to provide many more services. That is a tremendous problem for Burnley. I am sorry that there is nothing in the Queen's Speech to say that we will follow up the consultation on local government finance. It is not a matter of tinkering at the edges; we need real reform. I have said several times that it is no good altering the area cost adjustment because that will benefit only some local authorities; others will lose out. We need major structural change.

I know from my work in the general election, from looking around the area and from meeting people at my advice surgery and reading their letters, that the biggest single problem for my local authority is the fact that it has 3,500 empty homes. That is a nightmare, as we can see from the dereliction and other problems that are created. An old lady of 87 came to me. She has lived in her house for over 50 years and she is absolutely terrified because every property in her block is now empty; there have been three fires in adjacent properties and there are drug addicts around. People have to pay council tax on properties that they cannot sell because, with 3,500 empty homes, the council cannot be flexible. It cannot admit that the situation is nonsense because nobody can sell or buy those homes.

East Lancashire has 225,000 privately owned properties, about half of which were built before 1919. A quarter of the whole stock, some 52,000 properties, is unfit for habitation, and a similar proportion is in serious disrepair. That is a major problem for areas such as mine. There is nobody to live in those houses. Nobody wants them. There is no value in them if they are demolished. People who are trying to sell such houses say that their best offer so far is £1,200 or perhaps £4,000. One could buy almost a whole estate of empty houses in Burnley for the price of one property in London.

The current index of deprivation shows that, in housing, we have five of the worst 30 wards nationally. Four districts in east Lancashire are among the eight nationally with the most serious problems of low demand in private sector housing. It is estimated that £150 million of public money is spent on housing annually in east Lancashire, and two thirds of that is spent on housing benefit. We estimate that in Burnley alone we need £150 million, yet the capital expenditure for private housing is only £3 million. The problem is getting worse and we cannot solve it alone.

I accept that Burnley borough council must make difficult decisions. I say "difficult" because everybody who has been a councillor will know that as soon as clearance is mentioned, people protest and say that they want to save the nice houses tucked away in the midst of all the empty ones. However, clearance is the only way to solve the problem of surplus housing, and we must decide which houses should come down. We need Government help to do that. Burnley and east Lancashire have an excellent track record in delivering programmes for renewal areas, group repair and housing clearance, but we need more help not only in Burnley but in neighbouring authorities.

I call on the Government to increase the priority given to resources for private sector housing renewal and clearance, perhaps in the next comprehensive spending review, although that would be leaving it too long. We need to consider the case for designating special housing

market renewal areas where there is clear evidence of collapsed housing markets, as in much of east Lancashire. We need to issue guidance to the North West development agency saying that private sector housing renewal and clearance is an acceptable focus for its targeting of resources and programmes as part of the neighbourhood renewal agenda. We need to amend the public service agreement targets to include private sector housing as well as social housing.

I know that one of my colleagues wishes to speak, and I do not want to prevent him from doing so, so I shall make this point my last. Another colleague said that we need to introduce at an early date legislation on the licensing of private landlords, particularly in low-demand areas. I support that goal. Burnley and other towns need similar support and positive action from the Government, whom I strongly support.

9.54 pm

Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said that this was a bit like groundhog day, and he is right in the sense that no state opening day would be complete without him attacking a policy that was in his manifesto, as he did with the third generation mobile phone auction, which was included in the Conservative party manifesto. Equally, the day would not be the same without Members confusing long-winded speeches with scrutiny. I enjoyed the speech, and the performance, of the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), and I agreed with him on one thing—the adoption Bill is a key one and I particularly welcome it.

The election threw up three key issues and disposed of some shibboleths. Some key groups that were highly vocal in the previous Parliament should be given no credence in this one. The Countryside Alliance has been shown to be a busted flush. We ought to get a Bill on hunting out of the way, and not let it become the big issue that it became in the previous Parliament. Lady Young's homophobic attacks, too, have been shown to have no support in the country. For the second time, a party has gone into an election attacking the European Union with anti-EU rhetoric. As we found out in 1983, and the Tories have found out in the most recent election, there is no support in the country for that.

As a person who has always fought politically in the Tory heartlands, I am delighted that the climate is now one of concentrating on public services. Many of the points that I was going to make have been made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping). To a large extent, I agree with his analysis.

In their first term, the Government rightly put the emphasis on getting the economy right, but people now want much more than that. They want not just investment in public services but delivery of them. A number of people were disillusioned during the election campaign because of the language used. They did not connect, because they confused public-private partnerships with privatisation, job cuts and reduction of services.

The recent example of Middlesbrough striking a deal with the unions and with business is the kind of private finance initiative that we ought to be supporting. There are good examples around and we ought to be building on them. The PFI has delivered in some places, but it is not an universal solution.

[Brian White]

The issue of the delivery of public services has caused much disappointment. A comment made recently by the e-envoy concerned me. He said that we would be able to "tick all the boxes". That tick-box mentality causes concern. The Treasury thinks that it has delivered because it has allocated the money in the comprehensive spending review. The Departments think that they have delivered because they have pushed legislation or regulation through the House. The agencies think that they have delivered because they have conducted a pilot scheme and have shown Ministers how it works. However, the people conducting the pilot schemes are then left trying to secure sustainable funding and keep the schemes going. Most of the country will not have seen the pilot scheme, because it will have been conducted in only one or two areas or for a limited time. That is part of the problem.

The Prime Minister rightly said that we should not renationalise Railtrack because it would waste two years, during which we could be securing investment to improve services. However, if that argument applies to renationalisation, it also applies to privatisation.

One thing that has concerned me is the way in which funding operates. In a number of areas, pilots receive project funding from a variety of sources, and people are spending their time trying to get funding for projects, going to different sources at different times and not delivering services.

There is the issue of how we deal with core funding. Very small amounts of core funding would go a long way in delivering the kinds of public services that people want and expect from us. We need to learn that lesson as we deliver services throughout this Parliament. We should

address the confusion over capital and revenue, and ensure that there is sustainable revenue funding for projects.

There are so many different audit requirements, too. Every time an issue arises, we add another set of them. I fear that what Lord Cullen is saying will add several more. I suggest to Ministers that they take seriously the performance and innovation unit report and the Public Administration Committee report on modernising government. They contain a number of crucial recommendations.

There is a range of welcome steps in connection with the proposed communications Bill. I welcome the fact that the Bill will be published in draft form, which will allow us to take on board the fact that technology is changing. I hope that the Government recognise that, and adapt the legislation as it happens.

I should mention one issue associated with communications.

Mr. Kirkwood: Only one?

Brian White: There are lots, but I have time to mention only one.

California receives about 25 per cent. of its income from sales tax, and it reckons that that will disappear in the next 10 years. We have not even started to address the issue of the loss of VAT revenues in this country. We need to do so.

The low voter turnout did not result from apathy. It was a clear political statement—one that we need to take on board and tackle. The Queen's Speech gives us the opportunity to do so, and I hope that we shall address that matter seriously in this Parliament.

Debate adjourned.—[Angela Smith.]

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Student Debt

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Angela Smith.]

10 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am delighted to have the first Adjournment debate of the new Parliament. I welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Speaker, and my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) to her new post as Minister for Universities. Her promotion is well deserved and I look forward to working with her during the next few years.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to talk about student debt. It is an issue to which I have given some consideration. It was pure coincidence that the topic of last night's "File on Four" was student debt. I cannot pretend that I did not listen to the programme, but many of the ideas that I intend to introduce tonight had already formed in my mind. The programme was an interesting one. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister declined to give an interview, for reasons that I well understand, but I hope that she will go on the record tonight on what I regard as an important topic.

Several people helped me to assemble the information for this debate. In particular, I should like to thank Wendy Piatt of the Institute for Public Policy Research and Christine Gillie, Gillian Allen and Paul Bolton of the House of Commons Library. I shall draw extensively on the work of Claire Callender of South Bank university, who is an acknowledged expert in the field. In the past couple of days I have been lobbied by the British Medical Association and the National Union of Students. The BMA's comments related specifically to medical students, whereas the NUS took a more general approach to the issues as they affect students. The NUS hardship survey is a worthy and interesting study that covers much of the ground that I hope to cover tonight. Finally, in April I had a meeting with constituents who are students in higher education—the sector on which I tend to concentrate. Although I shall paraphrase what they told me, I mean to reflect their views accurately, because they provided useful information about the problems that they face as students.

The case that I shall present acknowledges that there is a problem of student debt. That problem is not a new one: when I worked in higher education for some years prior to being elected to Parliament in 1997, it was clear that many students had difficulty managing their living expenses in addition to their studies. Too often, students missed lectures owing to other commitments—work commitments. With work being harder to find in those days, they had to turn up or risk losing their jobs and have difficulty continuing with their studies. To me the question is not whether the problem exists, but what its scale and nature are.

As I said, the problem is not recent, but it appears to be assuming a higher profile in the press and among students. I do not pretend that there is no anger, angst or anxiety about the number of people who get into difficulty. The problem of debt is not limited to students—it affects all manner of people in society—but it is especially relevant to younger students and to those who have the commitments of mature students. I am sure that it is an issue to which my hon. Friend the Member

for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) will allude in his Adjournment debate on Friday, in which he will explore reasons for low turnout. I received quite a lot of correspondence from students telling me that they would not vote and that one of the reasons was that problems of student debt had caused them to feel somewhat detached from wider society. It is easy to say that and it is difficult to draw supporting evidence. Even anecdotally, students seem to be saying that that is what they feel. We must at least take notice of that.

One of the major tenets of the case that I am presenting is that we do not know nearly enough about student debt. Despite two major investigations into the funding of higher education over the past five years—the Dearing and Cubie reports—more recently a major report from the old Select Committee on Education and Employment, which considered student retention, and a House of Lords debate in March, which considered student poverty, I argue that there is still a lack of knowledge about what is really happening. It is important that the Government undertake an investigation to ensure that they know the scale and nature of the problem.

We hear about a threefold increase in the level of debt since 1996. It must remain conjecture, but there is some evidence that that is possible, if not likely. We need to know whether that is the real situation. It is pleasing that the Minister's predecessor, Baroness Blackstone, said on a number of occasions that she was prepared to review what was happening. She said that if there was a case to be made that there were problems, she would take action.

This is not a new area for me to delve into. I tabled written questions over the last year of the old Parliament, and I was pleased to receive a response to one such question from my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Malcolm Wicks), when he was the responsible Under-Secretary of State. He referred to the need for a review. It was not necessarily an especially positive response, but I can read into it that the Government remain open-minded. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities at least, as a result of the debate, to review what the Government have been saying about student debt to ascertain whether we can launch a full investigation. If nothing else, England deserves a full investigation, every other part of the British Isles having had such an investigation into student debt. That has resulted in some changes, certainly in Scotland. I understand that changes are afoot in both Northern Ireland and Wales. It is probably true that England should follow suit.

The "File on Four" programme yesterday evening threw up some interesting and some worrying facts and statistics. It is estimated that there are about 3,000 plus students who are either currently suspended or excluded from universities because of their failure to pay off debts. One in six students drops out before completing his or her course of study. That is costing the Exchequer about £200 million. Figures that come from the former Department for Education and Employment's investigation suggest that about 89 per cent. of students admitted to some element of financial worries. It appears that 62 per cent. of students admit to working. Perhaps that is inevitable, but work brings some pressure to bear on students' studies.

Certain groups are disadvantaged, including students who are single parents or who come from ethnic backgrounds. These factors will bring particular pressure on their continuation as students. Obviously, they tend to

[Mr. David Drew]

be those who face the greatest problems with student debt. Against that, according to the Universities and Colleges Admission Service, there is still a continuing increase in student applications. However, there seems to be some evidence that things become worse the lower down the social classes we go. There is certainly a continuing problem with mature students, which I mentioned during the passing of the Teaching and Higher Education Bill of 1998. I felt that the situation was disadvantaging those students. We need to consider carefully how mature students are encouraged into higher education.

The Government's record contains much on which we can congratulate them. They reacted swiftly to the Dearing report and brought forward the Teaching and Higher Education Bill. That changed the method of funding higher education and brought much-needed cash into the universities. Anyone who worked in or had connections with universities knew how parlous their state was. There were many arguments about what needed to be done to help individual students and to ensure that we invested properly in our economy and provided the productivity boost that is so desperately needed.

In some respects, therefore, the Government's record is one of which we can be proud, especially as it will boost the amount of money going to the university sector by upwards of £1 billion by 2003–04. Some clearly opposed what they saw as the end of free higher education, but some of us never saw it as such; it was a system that inevitably helped the better-off and we had to look at ways in which we could help the less-well-off in their ability to access the system. I support the continuing aim of my party and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that 50 per cent. of under-30s should go into higher education by the end of the decade. That is a tough standard by which to be judged, and the party and the Government have to make sure that they deliver on it.

The Government have done many other good things on the back of that proposal. Many of us feel that the 16 to 19 group was most disadvantaged by the lack of funding and too many students did not fulfil their post-16 education, so it was a wise move for the Government to introduce the excellent educational maintenance allowance. In areas in which it was piloted, support of about £40 a week was given if parents' income was less than £30,000 per annum. From all the evidence, the allowance seems to be working well and I look forward to the roll-out to a national scheme, which, I believe, is gathering pace.

As the scheme has been so successful for the 16 to 19 group, I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to consider whether we should roll it forward for a further year into the first year of university education for members of disadvantaged groups who would not otherwise be able to take up their university places. Again, I support that idea, which has been expressed by others. Other help needs to be given, such as looking at whether we could rejig thresholds and whether we could ask people to pay their tuition fees at the end of their course, rather than at the start, as there seems to be a problem with the perception of those fees, if not the way in which they work in reality.

There are therefore many things that we could do, and we can now draw on evidence from certain parts of the British Isles. Evidence from the Dearing report and the

post-Dearing investigation suggests that we need to look closely at the way in which disadvantaged groups in particular are being encouraged to take up their places or otherwise. The Cubie report, which was the Scottish Executive's response to overcoming some difficulties experienced north of the border, came up with the idea of a graduate endowment package. That is an interesting idea for several reasons, but I am not sure that it is as progressive as some people maintain. If we are to have fees, the choice between whether they are paid at the beginning or the end of the course is the way to progress. Will my hon. Friend look at that and comment accordingly?

The recent Select Committee report, which I mentioned earlier, came up with a raft of 40 recommendations, many of which the Government could usefully take on board. Indeed, they responded positively to the report. Professor Callender of South Bank university has backed up her evidence to the Committee with her comments on the Radio 4 programme last night. She argued that we perhaps still have an overly traditional approach to higher education, which means that we have not been able to bring in to higher education the necessary number of people from other backgrounds. I see that as the broadening of higher education, rather than the existing deepening of the numbers of those who have come from certain sectors in the past and will do so in future.

There is certainly a perception of debt problems, and we need a proper investigation of whether students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more risk averse and the questions that they need to consider if and when they decide to go into higher education. There is some confusion about the different mechanisms that are available: will my hon. Friend say whether it is possible to conflate different schemes to make sure that they are simple to understand, easy to operate and do not in any way prevent people from going into higher education?

It is fairly clear who the most disadvantaged groups are and why they struggle with student debt. They include parents, students with dependants, mature students, part-time students, students from ethnic minorities, students undertaking particular courses, such as medicine—as I have said, the British Medical Association drew my attention to some of the problems that such students have—and postgraduate students. I am not saying that all students in those groups suffer enormously from debt problems, but within those categories a good number of students face some difficulties.

The difficulties are well known, but they are worth repeating to ensure that everyone is aware of them. They include the loss not only of potential income as a result of giving up a job, but can involve the loss of passported benefits. I have never completely understood why a loan counts as income, but some people are substantially worse off as a result and the Government should look again at the loss of such benefits. There have been some changes and perhaps further improvements could be made and the work taken forward. Ethnic minorities in particular can do badly because some Muslims will not draw down loans.

There are no easy solutions; otherwise, someone would have come up with them. As Professor Callender, the leading expert on student debt, admits, no large-scale study has been undertaken, and we need a large-scale longitudinal study of what students have done both before college, at college and afterwards. If they obtain a reasonable job, they should be able to pay off their debts,

but if they do not, they can face continuing problems. We need to reconsider the thresholds to ensure that they are right—£10,000 seems a low level at which to ask people to start repaying their debt. Again, I would ask for further investigation of that. We need to recognise that the most disadvantaged who are sometimes deterred by such problems are the very people whom we want to attract into higher education.

My meeting with my constituents brought out many of the matters to which I have alluded. They looked askance at some of the work of the banks and at overdrafts. They were totally opposed to the Russell group proposals, and I am pleased that the Government, in their manifesto, ruled out top-up fees. However, more still needs to be done to encourage people into higher education.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to raise the matter today shortly after the general election. I hope that the Minister, in her first comments on the subject, will make some noises about the need for a review. We have now had three years of Dearing and it is about time that student debt was reviewed.

10.18 pm

The Minister for Universities (Ms Margaret Hodge): I warmly welcome you to the Chair again, Mr. Speaker, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on his re-election. He is an assiduous and dedicated worker for his constituents and he has had the just reward of securing re-election. I am sure that his constituents will be well served by his consistent and energetic efforts on their behalf.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this Adjournment debate, the first of the new Parliament, on an issue of importance to the Government, students, their families and teachers, and I welcome the opportunity to have a short debate on the subject.

Our manifesto sets out an exciting and challenging agenda for higher education. Our ambition is that by 2010 half of young adults under the age of 30 should enjoy the opportunity of participating in higher education. Personally, I relish that exciting and challenging ambition, as I believe that it provides enormous opportunities for the higher education sector. I hope and believe that the sector will embrace those opportunities with enthusiasm. After years of neglect, higher education is central to the Government's agenda. Our commitment to widening participation was a clear manifesto pledge. I believe that there has never been a better time for the sector, and I am delighted to have the privilege of holding my position as Minister for Universities at this time. My task will be to consider how we achieve our objective. Clearly, I will need to think about all the barriers that inhibit the agenda for widening participation, including student debt.

In considering the future, I want briefly to pay tribute to my predecessors in the previous Government. My right hon. Friend the new Home Secretary and my right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Blackstone have left me with a strong legacy on which we can build a successful future, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud will join me in recognising the important and lasting contribution that they have made to the higher education world.

We should not underplay the fact that higher education is a success story. In the "Education at a Glance" statistics recently published by the Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development, we top the league of OECD countries in our graduation rate. Those who choose to participate succeed in obtaining a degree at a higher rate in Britain. Our retention and attainment rate is second to none, and we should celebrate that. Interestingly, the retention rate has not changed with the new system of student support. Indeed, the drop-out rate has remained at about 17 per cent. since 1991-92, despite the change that we have introduced in student finance and the massive increase that we have enjoyed in student numbers.

My hon. Friend referred to the figures given in last night's radio programme. Although we must be concerned about a drop-out rate of 3,000 students from a cohort of 800,000 and will want to improve it, the figure should not cause us great concern and we should bear it in mind that we perform better than other countries.

We should celebrate also the fact that we are now enjoying an 18 per cent. real-terms growth in publicly planned spending on higher education in the six years to the financial year 2003-04. That is occurring against a background of unit funding falling by a third between 1982-83 and 1997-98. This year, there has been a real-terms increase for the first time. We should also celebrate the increased participation in higher education year on year. I point out to my hon. Friend that this year's figures show that the number of applications made by students under the age of 21 rose by 1.4 per cent. Interestingly enough, however, applications made by students in the 21-to-25 age group rose by 5.6 per cent. Although a worry remains in respect of more mature students, under-25s are applying at an increasing rate.

I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to keep student debt under review and we will want to consider it if we find that it is a barrier to widening participation. Equally, I must say to him that the issue of student support will always be one of balance between the financial contribution made by the taxpayer, the student and the graduate. Those three aspects must always be balanced. He will be interested to know that we are still among the highest spenders on student support as a proportion of higher education spend. We are third after New Zealand and Canada, and spend 35 per cent. of higher education spend on student support, compared with an OECD average of 18 per cent.

Widening participation among people from lower socio-economic groups, to whom my hon. Friend drew attention, is a key issue. The rate has remained stubbornly low since 1993. The lowest socio-economic groupings have remained at 25 per cent. Although participation by people from professional backgrounds was 55 per cent. in 1991, it is now 70 per cent. However, the closest correlation is not with student finance but with prior attainment. To widen participation we must therefore tackle that issue urgently. We are doing that.

My hon. Friend mentioned our support for more disadvantaged groups. We have a good record on that. I accept that, as he said, the system is complicated, and we will consider simplification. However, I shall give examples of the grants that we have introduced to ease the way for students from poorer backgrounds, and I hope that my hon. Friend will accept that we are making progress.

My predecessors introduced the excellence challenge programme, which has £190 million over three years. It focuses on education action zones and excellence in cities

[Ms Margaret Hodge]

areas. It buys much support, such as mentoring, master classes and summer schools. More important, it facilitates the introduction of bursaries at £2,000 per bursary, which is an outright grant for poorer students who live in such areas. We have quadrupled the money for access bursaries and hardship funds, which have been available since 1997-98. As well as increasing funding, we have introduced reforms to ensure that we target the money more effectively and earlier in the student's life in a higher education institution.

We have done a huge amount, with which I was associated in my previous ministerial role, to support students with disabilities. For example, we have tripled the available allowances, stopped the means testing of the disabled student's allowance and extended allowances to part-time students and postgraduates.

My hon. Friend did not seem to realise that we have done much to help students with children. For example, there is a school meals grant, which is worth £245 for each child under 11 and £265 for children from 11 to 16. We have introduced a generous child care grant, which covers 85 per cent. of the actual costs of child care. I am delighted that we have been able to raise the limits of eligible child care costs to £135 for one child and 200 for two children. We have also introduced grants for travel, books and equipment, an extra dependants grant and an access bursary grant for students with children.

On students from ethnic minorities, the picture is not as pessimistic as my hon. Friend suggests. The participation of students from ethnic minorities in higher education is higher than that of white students, although they come in at a later stage. The challenge is the

transition between higher education and work, where ethnic minority students encounter disadvantage and possibly discrimination.

We have tried to alleviate the burden on students who enter higher education. For example, we expect that 50 per cent. of students will not pay fees this September because of the increased contribution thresholds that we have set parents. Eighty-five per cent. of mature students will not pay fees.

We must have regard to the debt that students could incur in relation to their lifetime earnings. Not only are those earnings as much as 25 per cent. higher, but the Russell group found that, on average, graduates earned approximately £400,000 extra in their lifetime. That must be set against a student debt of less than £10,000.

My hon. Friend asked me to consider several specific matters, such as when fees were paid, the position of Muslim students, and the threshold for repaying loans. I assure my hon. Friend that we shall continue to keep those issues and other options under review.

These are exciting times for higher education. We are changing a system that catered only for the elite so that it provides opportunities for a much greater range of people. Of course, we want to ensure equality of opportunity and to maintain and enhance the quality of teaching as we expand participation. That is the challenge for us in this Parliament. I accept it with relish, but also with trepidation and humility. I am delighted that my hon. Friend has shown an interest in one of the issues with which we must deal. I assure him that I shall continue discussions with him and others who share that interest to ensure that we break down barriers to participation and widen access to higher education as part of providing opportunity for all.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 21 June 2001

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr. SPEAKER in the Chair]

Business Question

11.34 am

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will the Leader of the House please give the business for the coming week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): You, Mr. Speaker, informed the House yesterday of the subjects for debate on the Queen's Speech. The business for next week will therefore be:

From Monday 25 June to Wednesday 27 June, continuation and then conclusion of the debate on the Queen's Speech.

THURSDAY 28 JUNE—Motions on programming and deferred Divisions.

FRIDAY 29 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the following week will include:

MONDAY 2 JULY—Second Reading of the Homelessness Bill.

I should also like to inform the House that the first business in Westminster Hall, following the conclusion of the Queen's Speech, will be—

THURSDAY 28 JUNE—Debate on Road Safety

Mrs. Browning: I thank the Leader of the House and welcome him to his new position in the House. I also welcome the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg), who, I understand, is to ride shotgun for him. I welcome the hon. Gentleman to what I found to be an extremely interesting portfolio, and I hope that he finds it as interesting.

Will the Leader of the House give us more information about the business to be conducted next Thursday 28 June—programming and deferred Divisions? He will know the genesis of the changes to the way in which the House conducts its business—the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons, which was chaired by his predecessor. The House will be familiar with my grave reservations about the appropriateness of any Minister chairing a Select Committee. It therefore seems opportune, while such decisions are still being made, to ask the right hon. Gentleman to consider transferring responsibility for modernisation and changing the procedures of the House to the Procedure Committee or, at the very least, if the Modernisation Committee is to be reinstated, for it to be chaired by a Back Benchers, not a member of the Government.

I shall not rehearse what I may wish to share with the House next Thursday, but the debate on programming and deferred Divisions has come about because a member of the Government, using a Whip on matters on which there would normally be a free vote for hon. Members on both sides of the House, has insisted that the House change its procedures. Will next Thursday's business be conducted with a free vote for Labour Back Benchers?

We know that on the previous occasion, which was on the day of the American elections, Government Whips were rounding up Members from the bars of the Savoy to get them back to the House so that the Leader of the House could ensure that the democratic rights of Back Benchers were subjugated to the will of the Executive. If that is to be put before us next Thursday, we will oppose it. I seek the right hon. Gentleman's reassurance about that.

I note that the Leader of the House has not informed the House about any possible statements next week. Is the Prime Minister likely to make a statement next week on the Stockholm conference, not just because of the business that was transacted there, but because of the very worrying matters that surrounded the Stockholm conference, which have a read-across to any west European capital that might host—

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Gothenburg.

Mrs. Browning: It is not often that I am grateful to a Liberal Democrat, but I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I apologise—I was referring to the Gothenburg conference. Serious incidents of public disorder occurred there, which could have a read-across to all countries. Surely the Prime Minister should make a statement to the House.

I am pleased to see that after business questions we are to have a statement on foot and mouth from the right hon. Gentleman's predecessor, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Before the House rose for the general election, it was my clear understanding that the Prime Minister had taken personal responsibility for the management of the foot and mouth crisis. Will the Leader of the House confirm whether that is still the case? If so, when can we expect the Prime Minister, who I assume is still in charge of the matter, to report to the House and answer questions?

Mr. Cook: In a spirit of trying to build what consensus I can from the hon. Lady's questions—[*Interruption.*] No, I am not. I assure the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) that on this matter he and I can find full agreement. I welcome the hon. Lady's generous welcome to this post.

On the business for next week, yes, we will renew the programme motion. We will do so because there is a modernising agenda for the House, which must include the right of the House to carry out effective scrutiny and reasonable, modern working methods and hours for Members. There is a large agenda, on which I have been pressed to give a Government lead. Given the pressure to do so, the Leader of the House not taking an interest in the Modernisation Committee would send out a wholly inconsistent message. I hope that it will be set up as soon as possible and, as my predecessor did, I shall play a full

[Mr. Cook]

part on it. I would be subject to criticism from Labour Members and many others in the House if I did not show such leadership and interest.

I was pressed on whether the vote on Thursday will be a free vote. Yes, there will be a free vote on the Labour Benches. Given the hon. Lady's comments, I would welcome clarification of whether there will be a free vote among members of the official Opposition as well.

As the hon. Lady will be aware, the recent summit in Gothenburg took place while the House was not sitting. That is the only reason why there has been no statement on it. The Prime Minister has been assiduous in making statements on summits when the House has been sitting. Indeed, I personally accompanied him in making each of those statements in the previous Parliament.

There will be a statement on foot and mouth immediately after this business question. We were pressed repeatedly in the previous Parliament for more statements. I would have thought that the hon. Lady would welcome the fact that the new Minister responsible for foot and mouth will be making a statement to the House on the first available day. Surely that should be welcome to all those who demanded such a statement.

Andrew Bennett (Denton and Reddish): May I press the Leader of the House on the question of Select Committees? Will he confirm that it is his intention to get them up and running before the summer recess? Does he realise that, if he is to achieve that, new Standing Orders will need to be brought before the House next week?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is right: we face a very tight timetable to secure meetings of Select Committees before the House rises and to ensure that they have an opportunity to choose Chairs and decide when next to meet. Having said that, I shall endeavour to ensure that we meet that timetable. I share his concern that Select Committees should be set up as soon as possible and that the House should have the ability to use them for effective scrutiny. We will move on that as quickly as we can.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): May I add my warm welcome to the Leader of the House in his new post? My right hon. and hon. Friends and I look to him to play what we think can be a historic role in the reform of both Houses of Parliament. Both Houses, and their relations to one another, are looking to him for that initiative.

I endorse the view that has just been expressed about the need for urgent action to set up and begin the work of Select Committees. The Leader of the House will recall a long hiatus following the 1997 election before they got back to work, which we all very much regret. Given that it would seem that everybody in the House—from the outgoing leader of the Conservative party, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), who referred to the important role that Select Committees play, to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay), whose comments on the issue in last night's debate were extremely important—is concerned that Select Committees should get back to work as soon as possible, I press the Leader of the House to use his very best endeavours to ensure that before the summer recess. If,

as I am sure he will understand, that is delayed until the autumn, they might not be back in action until the end of the year or even the new year.

In connection with the Gothenburg Council, I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to a planted question on today's Order Paper, which will provide only a written answer on the outcome of that Council. Will he use his best endeavours to ensure that the House receives such information by means of a full ministerial statement? We look to him to represent not just the Government but us, to ensure that on such matters the centre of gravity returns from the broadcasting studios to this House.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his welcome and support for my objective of getting Select Committees up and running before the House breaks for the summer recess. I will require the House's co-operation to meet that very tight timetable. At least two separate decisions will be required of this Chamber. As my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Bennett) has pointed out, one will be to change the Standing Orders in order to track changes in Departments; another will be to approve nominations to the Committees. I shall endeavour to enable the House to reach decisions on those matters before the summer. I will need its co-operation to ensure that the decisions are taken and would welcome from the official Opposition the sort of support that we have heard from the hon. Gentleman.

On Gothenburg, a written answer comes to the House and is the property of the House. It is not the property of the wider public until it is made to the House. I can give the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members an assurance that they will find plenty of opportunities to debate Europe before we arrive at the summer recess.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): Will the Government give any indication regarding hunting with dogs? The Queen's Speech refers to a free vote, but would not it be right for the Government to provide time for the matter to be finalised at long last? If there is an overwhelming majority in this Parliament for a ban on hunting with dogs, as there was in the previous one, let us finalise the issue once and for all, using Government time and the Parliament Act.

Mr. Cook: Our manifesto, on which we were elected, committed us to providing time for a free vote of Parliament. The Queen's Speech of the very first Session of this Parliament commits us to carrying through that manifesto commitment. I agree with my hon. Friend that it is important for us to resolve the issue, and I believe that many hon. Members, whatever their view on its substance, would like it to be resolved in the current Session.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): I, too, add my congratulations to the Leader of the House on his appointment.

As the right hon. Gentleman considers the week after next, will he bring to the House for decision regulations relating to the pay of hon. Members, office costs allowances and the other related matters that have been pending for a considerable time, on which there is need

and urgency? I hope that, unlike his predecessor, he will find an early opportunity to address these matters for the benefit of everyone in the House.

Mr. Cook: I am very sympathetic to the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes. The decisions on pay and the office costs allowance affect not only hon. Members but our staff. In the wake of the election, I know that many hon. Members are facing decisions on staff that are difficult to take with the lack of certainty about the future of the office costs allowance. I hope that we can resolve the matter as soon as possible.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): I very much welcome the announcement that we will discuss programme motions on Thursday. Many Back Benchers are very dissatisfied about the way in which such motions were discussed in the previous Parliament and want the current Parliament to be more efficient and effective. In that spirit, may I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the first Modernisation Committee report of the Session of 1997-98 and to the many ways in which it suggested that the legislative process could be modernised? Will he revisit the report and consider whether it would be helpful to draw Ministers' attention to ways in which they could progress Government business more effectively?

Mr. Cook: I am aware of the previous reports of the Modernisation Committee. In fairness, I should say that, of the 65 recommendations that the Committee made in the previous Parliament, 56 were carried through by the Government and the House. There is unfinished business and I assure my hon. Friend that we want to revisit it. That is, after all, why I have just committed the Government to setting up the Modernisation Committee and myself to playing a full part in it.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Is the Leader of the House aware that Gosport was not the only constituency in which the local provision of hospital services was the biggest issue on the doorstep? Is he aware also that the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor), whom I am pleased to see in his place, and I propose to form an all-party group on the local provision of hospital services? Will he provide an early opportunity for the issue to be debated in the House, as it is of overwhelming concern to our constituents?

Mr. Cook: The House will be aware that our priority for early business is to ensure that we get under way with the Bills to which we have committed ourselves in the Queen's Speech and about which the House has heard. I am confident that there will be many opportunities in the current Session for the House to debate health matters. Of course, we are well aware that the health service is not what we would wish it to be. That is why we are in the middle of the largest hospital-building programme that the NHS has ever known, and why we have committed ourselves to a 10-year programme for the NHS that will provide an additional 7,000 beds. If that had been done in the decade before, when the previous Government were in office, we might not now have to make good the damage that was done.

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): May I add to the weight of congratulations to my right hon. Friend

on his appointment and welcome the tone of his response to the various questions on Select Committees? Can the House take that as a sign that my right hon. Friend will set himself the task of being the first Leader of the House for generations to supervise shifting the balance back from Government to the House? Will he provide a positive response to the Liaison Committee report that was produced in the previous Session and the excellent Hansard Society report that was issued this week? It proposes giving greater resources, status and independence from Government to Select Committees.

Mr. Cook: The process of modernisation is necessarily continual; we have therefore already undertaken much modernisation. My hon. Friend undervalues my predecessors' contribution in the previous Parliament, which included introducing Westminster Hall debates, the changes to Thursday sittings and draft legislation. However, there is no ground for complacency, and I assure my hon. Friend that if we are serious about having a modern House that is fit for the 21st century many tasks remain to be done. I shall continue the process of modernisation.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I fully support the views that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) expressed. I congratulate the Leader of the House on his appointment and make a further plea to him to consider the House's method of selecting hon. Members to serve on Select Committees. Will the right hon. Gentleman bear it in mind that it is important that the Selection Committee is not dominated by the usual channels? Will he also reconsider what appears to be his decision to continue with the Modernisation Committee, which he will chair? The Government could be perceived as abusing their position to devise procedures to help them to get their business through rather than enabling the House to scrutinise them and hold them to account. Does not the right hon. Gentleman believe that the Modernisation Committee's functions could be carried out by the Procedure Committee, the impartiality and good sense of which was shown by its excellent report on Mr. Speaker's election?

Mr. Cook: I fully concur that the Procedure Committee produced a good report, but the Modernisation Committee must consider wider issues than procedure. I assure the hon. Gentleman that, as Chairman, I shall not try to railroad or bulldoze the Committee; I am sure that he would not allow me to do that. In the previous Session, the Modernisation Committee produced consensual reports. If I withdrew from the Committee, did not participate fully in and show commitment to its work, that could convey the wrong message.

I am aware of the debate about the appointment of Select Committee members, which was rekindled by the Hansard Society this week. I sense that the House wants the Select Committees to be up and running as quickly as possible. It is therefore not the time to start to rewrite the basis on which members are nominated.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Ah!

Mr. Cook: It is self-evident that if the House wants the Select Committees to be up and running in the next four or five weeks, that will have to be done by the means that

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are available to us. Hon. Members must make a choice about that. I stress to the Opposition that Labour Members who are nominated must be elected by the parliamentary Labour party. That must be included in the timetable for creating Select Committees. If the Opposition also did that, both sides would use a democratic process.

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): It became a practice in the previous Parliament for the Welsh Affairs Committee to examine the Queen's Speech for matters that are relevant to Assembly Members. As former Chairman of the Committee, may I add my weight to calls for the Committee to be set up as soon as possible so that we can examine some of the matters in the Queen's Speech?

Mr. Cook: I assure my hon. Friend that we wish all departmental Committees to be set up as soon as possible and at the same time, if possible.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): Of course, the Leader of the House needs the House's co-operation to set up Select Committees before the summer recess, but he rightly identified the first two steps as motions that must be moved by the Deputy Chief Whip. He has to create the Selection Committee, and there is no reason for not tabling that motion next week. He must then table changes to Standing Orders to reconfigure the departmental Select Committee structure to the new architecture in Whitehall. That is easily achieved by making the Select Committee that will cover environment, food policy and agriculture bigger. The others can remain more or less the same. Why does not the Leader of the House take both steps next week?

Mr. Cook: I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that I did not say that I was not going to do those things next week. If he is patient, he will find that progress will be made on these matters. I stressed that we need the co-operation of the Chamber. Those motions are debateable.

Mr. Forth: They are all debateable.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) has just had that confirmed by an expert on which motions are debateable. That does not fill me with confidence that I would have co-operation in all parts of the House.

Barbara Follett (Stevenage): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and welcome the emphasis that he has placed on modernisation. Will he continue to bear in mind the real need to bring the hours of this place into line with the 21st century rather than the 19th?

Mr. Cook: I am very sympathetic with the point that my hon. Friend makes. I speak as a Member of long standing who was here throughout the 1974 to 1979 Parliament, when our hours were longer than those of any subsequent Parliament. If we want to demonstrate that the House is in the 21st century, we should adopt working methods that other people can relate to rather than stare at in wonderment. It is very important that the House

should be able to carry out effective scrutiny, but wasting the time of the House of Commons does not constitute effective scrutiny.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The Leader of the House, whose appointment I, too, warmly welcome, announced the Second Reading of a Government Bill on, I think, Monday week. May I ask him not automatically to timetable every single Government Bill? We discovered in the previous Parliament that that can lead to an inflexible structure and inadequate discussion of the Bills. Will he explore with good will some alternative, more flexible arrangements?

Mr. Cook: I am absolutely enthusiastic about exploring with good will more flexible arrangements, but good will has to be a two-way street. Without good will on the other side, the remedy of timetabling that enables Back Benchers to take part in debates held at reasonable hours is available to us. If we can find good will on both sides, I am sure that we can find alternative, flexible solutions, but we need that good will on both sides.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): My right hon. Friend will recognise that the Deregulation and Regulatory Reform Committee has a legislative role to play, and that once that Committee is established it will be able to become involved in legislation. Will he ensure that it is established at the earliest possible date? Will he also give an assurance that—as the timetables for new measures become apparent—no new measure will be laid before the House until that Committee has come into being?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to one of the Select Committees that will have a legislative effect and role. There are others, such as the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. In both cases, it would be our wish to see them set up as quickly as possible.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Perhaps, in welcoming the right hon. Gentleman and the new Parliament, I can ask a non-partisan question that affects a large number of our fellow countrymen and women. The matter has been drawn to my attention in my capacity as co-chairman of what I hope is one of the most respected all-party committees. At which ministerial questions will Members from all parts of the House have the opportunity to ask questions specifically about the needs, interests and welfare of disabled people?

Mr. Cook: I understand that the answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is the Department of Work and Pensions, but I would be happy to give him further guidance before the relevant Question Time comes round.

Mr. Nell Gerrard (Walthamstow): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time on the current situation in the middle east, and in particular on the problems in the West Bank and Gaza? He will know that, even though those difficulties have been going on for some time—since last autumn—and there is considerable disquiet among many hon. Members, particularly about the actions of the Israeli Government, we have still not had a debate in the House on the subject

in all that time, other than a short Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall. I hope that he will agree that this subject deserves a reasonable length of debate in the House.

Mr. Cook: I have absolutely no difficulty in agreeing with my hon. Friend that that is an important and grave matter. It occupied much of my time in the previous Parliament, and I express my continuing distress that the violence continues. The more that the violence continues, the further we move from the negotiating table, which can be the only basis for a secure and permanent peace.

I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the fact that, tomorrow, the House will hold a debate on foreign affairs and defence in which the Foreign Secretary will participate. That will be an appropriate and suitable moment for the House to air those concerns and others on foreign policy.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Will the right hon. Gentleman arrange an early debate so that the House can discuss whether it is appropriate that hon. Members representing Scottish constituencies can vote on business that affects only England? Does he understand that there is a great sense of unfairness in England about that arrangement, coupled with a sense of unfairness that Scotland is over-represented in this place, and overfunded too? Should not we discuss those matters, and soon?

Mr. Cook: On the question of representation, the right hon. and learned Gentleman will be aware that, before the next election, there will be changes in the representation of Scotland in the House.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): That is the first announcement of it.

Mr. Cook: That is the proposal. It is for the Boundary Commission to make proposals, but we anticipate it happening in this Parliament.

On the question of Scottish Members participating in the business of the House, this is a unitary Chamber—one in which all Members have equal rights. If the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) is proposing that that should be changed, he is proposing a fundamental constitutional change that would be warmly welcomed by the Scottish nationalists north of the border.

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's appointment, which comes with the highest expectations about what he will do. He knows that serious reform of the House comes only when the House has a Leader who is committed to that reform. That was true of St. John-Stevás and of Richard Crossman, and we hope that his name will be added to that list.

Modernisation is a weasel word: it means either that the Government get their business more efficiently or that we shift the balance between Parliament and the Executive. Is my right hon. Friend committed to shifting that balance and is he prepared for his tenure as Leader of the House to be judged by that yardstick?

Mr. Cook: I am absolutely committed to finding the right balance, but I say to my hon. Friend that he would

be unwise to identify a conflict between the Government securing the measures that they were elected to deliver and the House providing effective scrutiny, both of the text of that legislation and of other acts by the Government. Nothing would bring parliamentary democracy more into disrepute than the Government being unable to deliver on the commitments that they made to their electorate.

Mr. Speaker: Dr. Spink.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Dr. Robert Spink (Castle Point): Encouraged as I am by my colleagues, may I say what a pleasure and a great privilege it is to return to the House to serve the worthy people of Castle Point?

May I urge the right hon. Gentleman to hold a debate on the euro referendum so that we can expose the tensions and clear up the confusion that is obvious between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor on that issue?

Mr. Cook: I must say that the proposition that there are tensions on that matter between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor seems to rest on an extremely large reading of what the Chancellor said yesterday. That was a faithful restatement of Government policy, and it has been Government policy since 1997.

The House will have opportunities to debate European policy over the next few weeks. We shall be particularly interested to learn what will be the policy of the Opposition after their defeat at the election, and whether their position on the euro will be "never" or whether they will rethink their opposition, having been defeated on their commitment to rule the euro out for only one Parliament.

Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): I also welcome my right hon. Friend to his post. Following a recent visit to my constituency, he knows the importance of tourism to the rural economy. Will he find time for a debate on the impact of the foot and mouth crisis on the rural economy, particularly tourism, as many people are wondering whether they will survive this season? The Government need to address the future of our rural economies, especially the problems in the tourism industry.

Mr. Cook: I fully understand that foot and mouth has had an impact not only on the agriculture industry, but on the wider rural economy, especially tourism and the leisure industry. Those matters are entirely relevant to the statement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which follows. After all, they are matters that the Government will consider carefully. [Interruption.] Obviously the microphone is paying close attention to this exchange. That is why the Government have changed the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food into a Ministry for rural affairs and the environment. We shall take that wider perspective as we address the crisis in the rural economy.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): May I, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist group, welcome and congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment? Will he take account

[Mr. Roy Beggs]

of the concern that exists throughout the United Kingdom among service personnel and others who were exposed to chemical treatment before and during the Gulf war, and those who currently suffer from Gulf war syndrome? Will he provide time for that and other related matters to be debated, so that those who served our country and who are now suffering are properly treated?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman has expressed himself on a matter about which he obviously feels deeply, and which is of deep concern to a number of former service men. In the previous Parliament, there were a number of exchanges on this matter in the House, and I must tell him that we have no plans to hold further debates on it. However, he has available to him all the devices of the House to pursue this matter, which is clearly of real concern to him.

Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): May I add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend on his recent appointment? In the light of President Bush's continued resistance to the Kyoto protocol, when might we have another opportunity to discuss the protocol, particularly with a view to establishing a common European stance? Will he give assurances that the environmental impact of transport will continue to be at the forefront of those debates following the departmental restructuring?

Mr. Cook: I reassure my hon. Friend that, in the decisions that the Government take, we shall continue to put great emphasis on the environmental impact of transport, as the Chancellor has already shown in successive Budgets. On the Kyoto principle, my hon. Friend will be aware that, at the Gothenburg summit, all the countries of the European Union agreed that it was important that European Union members should proceed to ratify the Kyoto protocol. It would not be right to proceed with further parliamentary processes before the forthcoming meeting on the Kyoto protocol, which I think will be held in Germany next month. However, I assure my hon. Friend that the Government are fully committed to carrying out our part of the European share of the cut in greenhouse gas emissions, which we were required to do as part of the Kyoto protocol. We have every intention of proceeding and it is very important for the next generation that we do so.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): In view of the importance of programme motions to the proper scrutiny of Bills in Standing Committees, does the Leader of the House accept that they should be properly debated and voted on? Does he also accept that it would not fill the House with confidence about his reforming zeal as a new Leader of the House dedicated to improving scrutiny of the Executive if his very first act were to ensure that programme motions were not properly debated and were voted on in deferred Divisions?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman must be aware that any motion that is tabled can be voted on. He must be aware that the last report of the Modernisation Committee made observations on that matter. The matter is relevant to the motion that we shall consider next Thursday.

It would be a rather bad start for the Leader of the House if he began by ignoring the Modernisation Committee's recommendations.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to early-day motion 23 on national missile defence, which has the support of more than 170 Members?

[That this House expresses concern at President Bush's intention to move beyond the constraints of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in developing missile defence; and endorses the unanimous conclusions of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, which recommended that the Government voice the grave doubts about NMD in the UK, questioned whether US plans to deploy NMD represent an appropriate response to the proliferation problems faced by the international community and recommended that the Government encourage the USA to explore all ways of reducing the threat it perceives.]

Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in the past, there has been a parliamentary tradition whereby major changes in defence policy have not always received the fullest parliamentary scrutiny? In the spirit of a modernising agenda designed to give greater powers of scrutiny to the House, will he find time in the very near future to arrange a debate in Government time on President Bush's proposals for national missile defence, particularly its implications for the United Kingdom's defence and foreign policy?

Mr. Cook: I have read the early-day motion. The crucial issue is the extent to which the United States can find agreement with Russia. We have urged on Washington the importance both of consulting closely with close allies and of entering into dialogue with Russia to find a strategic framework within which America can meet its real and strongly perceived perceptions of the threat to it from rogue states. It would be entirely proper for any of the Members who signed the early-day motion to raise their concerns in the debate on foreign affairs and defence to be held tomorrow.

Mr. Forth: I congratulate the Leader of the House on his recent promotion. As a Member of the House with long and distinguished service and a parliamentarian of great repute, will he give us his personal guarantee that he will always put first the interests of the House as a whole, and that he will ensure that in no way will the traditional rights of opposition and scrutiny be reduced in the interests of the Government getting their business more easily, more speedily or without proper scrutiny and accountability?

Mr. Cook: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his congratulations. One of the greater delights of my new post is that I shall be able to see even more of him.

I hope that in my period in office I shall be able to provide for more effective scrutiny of Government legislation and actions by all Members of the House, whether on the Opposition or on the Government side. It is an important principle of parliamentary democracy that Governments deliver the programme on which they were elected, so I do not intend to do anything that will

undermine the public's faith in the proposition that what they voted for is what they get from the Government whom they elected.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): In welcoming the right hon. Gentleman to his new post, may I remind him of the agonising debate that we had in the last Parliament on therapeutic cloning? After long debate and much thought, many Members on both sides of the House decided that we would vote in favour of therapeutic cloning on the basis that we would have an early Bill to outlaw human cloning for other purposes. That legislation was not mentioned in the Queen's Speech. Will we have an early debate on this matter, and will we have an opportunity to consider legislation on human cloning as it is a grey area that has not yet been outlawed in this country, and all Members agree that it has huge ethical implications?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this complex issue, which provokes strong feeling. He will be aware that, because of its complexity, this will not be an easy matter on which to legislate. The commitments that we have given are for a full Parliament and not just for the first year. I believe that this is an example of when draft legislation may be of value in enabling those interested in the subject to comment before the House legislates, but we shall have to explore that as the Parliament proceeds.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): We understand that the Government have a busy programme, but surely top priority should be given to an issue that was considered urgent and was promised in the 1997 manifesto but has not yet been delivered. Will the right hon. Gentleman provide the House with an early statement about why the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Bill, which would help to tackle a problem that kills 120,000 people each year and for which the health service needs new recruits, is not mentioned in the Government's programme for the first year, given that it was first promised in 1997? Public health physicians up and down the country are amazed that the Government's priorities are seriously in danger of affecting the health of the nation.

Mr. Cook: It was a disappointment to the Government that we were not successful in securing the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Bill at the end of the previous Session. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, there was some controversy over the proposals and there was not unanimous support for the Bill. As the Prime Minister has said, it is not the position that the only Bills to be put before the House are those named in the Queen's Speech. If time permits, such legislation will be a high priority for us, and we will try to accommodate it in the time available. It will certainly be a high priority for a future Session of this Parliament.

I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that the Department of Health has two Bills in this Session, and the health of the nation is well catered for in the priorities set out in the Queen's Speech.

Foot and Mouth

12.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): With permission, I should like to make a statement on the foot and mouth outbreak. I want to take this, the earliest possible opportunity, to update the House on developments since my right hon. Friend the then Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food made his statement on Thursday 3 May, and to set out the measures that the Government continue to take.

As of midday today, there had been a total of 1,771 confirmed cases of foot and mouth disease in the United Kingdom, including four in Northern Ireland. Yesterday there was only one case. Since my right hon. Friend addressed the House some seven weeks ago, there have been an average of between four and five cases a day. That should be compared with the highest level of more than 40 cases a day at the end of March.

The number of animals slaughtered for disease control purposes has now reached 3.4 million, an increase of 1 million since 3 May. The percentages for each species remain roughly the same: about 80 per cent. are sheep, 16 per cent. cattle and 4 per cent. pigs. A further 1.1 million animals have been slaughtered under the livestock welfare disposal scheme. The total number of animals slaughtered under both headings is about 4.5 million so far, out of a total United Kingdom livestock population of about 55 million.

Let me put that figure in context. Although by anyone's standards a massive number of animals have had to be slaughtered, it is a substantially smaller number than the number that we slaughter for consumption in an average week—some half a million cattle, sheep and pigs.

My right hon. Friend warned the House on 3 May that the epidemiological advice was that cases would continue to occur for some time yet. Sadly, that remains the case. He also warned that we expected that the outbreak would have a long tail, that there would be further outbreaks in some parts of the country, and that the number of cases per day would fluctuate. That remains the position today.

The objective also remains to eradicate the disease as quickly as we can. Let me make it perfectly clear that although we cannot put a definitive time scale on the achievement of that goal, no one is suggesting that it will be in the next few days or weeks. It is therefore hugely important that no one relaxes their guard. Certainly all the resources, both civil and military, that we as a Government need to bear down on the disease will be deployed where they are needed for as long as they are needed.

More than 900 vets are still actively working on the outbreak, including about 80 from abroad. As the number of daily cases has declined, it has been possible to reduce the number of military personnel now working on the ground to about 250, mainly in the north of England. That reduction can, of course, be speedily reversed if the need should arise. Indeed, our immediate response to the outbreak in the Settle area of north Yorkshire showed that we can react rapidly when the situation requires it. And, of course, hundreds of administrative staff remain in place in control centres throughout the country.

My right hon. Friend was able to say on 3 May that there were no backlogs of animals awaiting disposal anywhere in Great Britain. I am pleased to say that we

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have maintained that position ever since, and it remains the case today. A new system, co-ordinated in the headquarters in Page street, London, ensures that carcasses are picked up from farms promptly after slaughter, and transported to their final destination without further delay.

Of course, it is much easier to achieve rapid turnaround when there are just four or five cases per day than when there are 30 or 40. Nevertheless, the task of ensuring that many thousands of carcasses are collected and disposed of each day is itself a major logistical exercise. Seven or eight cases can involve 30 or 40 farms, including the contiguous premises, and therefore up to 20,000 carcasses.

Protection of the environment and human health are our priority for all disposal options. Rendering is the best way of disposing of carcasses, and will always be our first choice, but rendering capacity is finite and can quickly become overstretched, at least in the short term, if on any given day the number of cases rises. The Department of Health has advised that the greatest public health hazard would be leaving carcasses out in the open, especially in warm weather, so other means of disposal may still need to be called upon from time to time.

If other options are exhausted, we shall on occasion still have to turn to licensed landfills and mass burial sites. I understand the strength of local feelings about burial sites, and I assure the House that a decision to use such a site, even for just one day or for a few lorryloads, is not taken lightly. However, as has been said many times, there are no easy options for disposal, and if the circumstances arise we must be prepared to utilise all the national assets that we have, including burial sites.

Those are the steps taken to deal effectively with the outbreak of the disease. Even more important, however, is preventing further spread of the disease. I cannot emphasise too strongly the continuing importance of high standards of biosecurity—practical precautionary measures to prevent further spread of the disease—on and around farms. We are taking every opportunity to drive home that message, using interviews in the national and local media and advertisements in the local and the farming press.

We have also produced a video demonstrating a practical approach to biosecurity. That will shortly be made available to all livestock farmers and others in the industry, accompanied by a leaflet and letter from Jim Scudamore, the chief veterinary officer. It is essential to drive the message home. I appeal to all right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House who have expressed continued concern and interest in the concerns of their constituents to play their part in conveying that message to those constituents.

As the House is aware, the outbreak continues in a number of areas of the country, but fortunately other regions have had no cases at all, or have had no further cases for a long time and are looking forward to a return to normality. We are doing everything we can to facilitate that, subject, naturally, to the overriding priority not to put the eradication of the disease at risk.

Thirty-seven infected areas have now had that designation lifted. Those are areas where not only have there been no new cases for more than 30 days, but thorough veterinary and serological testing has taken

place. Some 43,000 farms have benefited from the lifting of restrictions; that is about a third of the farms that have ever been restricted.

As I have said, wherever there is a remaining disease problem, we will put all our efforts into eradicating it. At the same time, I am conscious of the call from the farming industry and the wider rural community for some of the tighter movement restrictions to be relaxed. As ever, there is a balance to be achieved between continuing to bear down on the disease—movement restrictions are an essential part of our armoury for control—and allowing reasonably normal business to take place where the risk of spreading the disease is very low. The restrictions applied must be kept proportionate to the risk.

Therefore, I can announce two significant changes to the rules on the movement of livestock. The industry has been pressing for some time for a relaxation of the licence restrictions to enable more normal trade to take place. Clearly, our first priority is to ensure that nothing is done that puts the eradication of the disease at risk, but the veterinary advice is that certain changes can be made, provided that strict criteria are applied and the animals are otherwise eligible to be moved under existing foot and mouth disease rules.

First, as from tomorrow, Friday 22 June, livestock—cattle, sheep and pigs—from within infected areas will be permitted to move, under licence, for slaughter in abattoirs outside the infected area, both for human consumption and under the livestock welfare disposal scheme. Secondly, also from tomorrow, cattle and pigs from outside infected areas will be permitted to move, under licence, into provisionally free areas on welfare grounds. At the same time, welfare movements of cattle and pigs from one provisionally free area to another will be permitted. The veterinary advice is that a similar easing of welfare movements for sheep would present too high a risk in the current situation.

Relaxation of movement restrictions where reasonable is important for our farming industry, but foot and mouth disease has had a devastating impact on the wider rural economy. As part of our strategy for wider rural recovery, we want footpaths and other rights of way to be reopened wherever that is safe. Considerable progress has been made in recent weeks, with more than half of all paths now open. That reflects real effort and good will on the part of many local authorities, farmers and walkers. However, some local authorities have kept paths shut when it is quite difficult to see that that is justified; the risks have been assessed as very slight. What is also unhelpful is that, even where most paths are open, people are often still confused about which paths are open and which are shut.

I have asked my right hon. Friend the Minister for Rural Affairs to examine as a matter of urgency whether we can revoke the remaining blanket closures of paths in the near future. We would keep in place local authority powers to close paths selectively where necessary—mainly within 3 km of infected premises—and we will listen to representations from local authorities and others who may wish to retain blanket closures in particular areas affected by disease. We recognise that that may be the right response in areas where there is or has been a high concentration of disease, and implementing path-by-path closures would be difficult.

Revoking remaining blanket closures will both increase the number of paths open and, as is equally important, make much clearer which paths are open and which are closed. It will mean that by the summer holidays most of the countryside will be well and truly open, and seen to be open, for visitors and for business.

We are also continuing to take action to help rural businesses, particularly in the worst affected areas, to cope with the impact of foot and mouth. In the past three months, the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise have deferred £71 million of tax without interest charges for severely affected businesses. Local authorities have granted or are considering 3,500 applications for hardship rate relief, in addition to deferment of rates bills and applications for revaluation related to foot and mouth impacts.

Furthermore, we have provided additional funding of £39 million for the business recovery fund run by the regional development agencies to add to the resources that they had already been allocated and have themselves reprioritised for such use. In addition to business support, and funding for local and regional promotion, more than 200 businesses have had offers of grant from the fund, and we expect all RDAs to have the fund fully operational with their business links partners by the end of this month.

The disease has been a terrible blow to farmers and to the wider rural community, and for some, recovery will still seem a distant dream. Nevertheless, work to help farmers emerge from the crisis has begun, and it is of course linked to the Government's aims to create sustainable and diverse farming and food industries and to promote thriving rural economies and communities.

In the short term, we have already paid out about £790 million in compensation for slaughtered animals in addition to the £156 million announced for agrimonetary compensation and an estimated total of £230 million under the livestock welfare disposal scheme. Looking to the longer term, members of the rural task force and other stakeholders are already engaged in discussions with my Department and my ministerial colleagues on how best to deliver a sustainable and thriving countryside.

It is clear that we must learn the lessons from the outbreak. Although everyone was trying to do his or her best, it is in the nature of things that some errors are likely to have been made. What is important is not only to identify what we could and should do better next time, but to highlight the many things that went well, and that we should do again if the same or a similar situation should arise.

We also need to examine issues such as the possible future shape of the disease control regime and the changes that might be necessary at EU as well as at national level. Again, a review is planned for the autumn, and we are keen to play an active part in that. I discussed all those points with EU colleagues at this week's Agriculture Council, where other member states continued to be not only appreciative of our efforts but—as my right hon. Friend the previous Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food reported to the House—very supportive and helpful to our country and our Government in dealing with the outbreak.

My Department and I are determined to bring the outbreak to an end. I have been tremendously impressed by the commitment of all those working on foot and mouth whom I have met in my short time in office,

including veterinarians, soldiers and administrative and technical staff, who in many parts of the country are still working very long hours, seven days a week. I am most grateful to those who have contributed to the team effort, not least to our own former ministerial team, and I pay tribute to them all. I myself hope to visit one of the worst affected areas in the north of England soon.

In closing, I ask for us all, on both sides of the House, to continue to work together as we move nearer to our ultimate goal of the complete eradication of the disease from the United Kingdom and a return to normality in farming and rural communities.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I congratulate the Secretary of State on her appointment. I know that she brings to the job wide experience of Government, and also knowledge of the countryside, both at home and abroad, acquired partly at least from her caravanning holidays. I look forward to debating with her the whole range of the responsibilities of her enlarged Department in the coming weeks, starting on Tuesday next. I hope that she appreciates the depth and urgency of the crisis in our countryside. Whatever the merits or otherwise of restructuring in Whitehall, what the countryside, farming, tourism and the whole rural economy need is not a new Department but a new Government policy.

I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has taken this first available opportunity to make a statement on the foot and mouth epidemic, although I have to say in passing that a copy of her statement reached me only five minutes before she started speaking. I also warmly welcome the progress that she has announced on relaxing the restrictions on livestock movements from infected areas. Again, I offer the Opposition's full support for those and any further measures that are needed both to eradicate the disease and to help the industries that have been damaged.

I hope that the Secretary of State will not fall into her predecessor's habit of claiming regularly that the epidemic is under control when plainly it is not, or make claims like those made by the Prime Minister just before the general election, when he said that the Government were on the home straight in dealing with the disease, when plainly they were not.

I hope that the Secretary of State will visit not only one but many of the worst affected areas—in the Yorkshire dales, Lancashire, Cumbria, Devon and Somerset—where she will find that farmers paint a very different picture from that which has regularly been painted by Ministers. For example, in Yorkshire, after the Prime Minister's claim at the beginning of May, the disease spread into previously uninfected areas at an alarming rate. Does the right hon. Lady realise that the damage caused by the disease is not confined to the countryside? For example, in April, the number of visitors to Britain, including those intending to come to urban areas, was down by a quarter.

I am surprised, and very disappointed, that the Secretary of State did not refer to the public inquiry that is clearly needed. The scale of the epidemic makes it essential that a full public inquiry be held to establish how the disease reached Britain and why the Government reacted so slowly—and often incompetently—in those crucial early weeks, and to advise on an effective prevention strategy to minimise the risk of another similar national disaster.

[Mr. Tim Yeo]

Does the Secretary of State recognise that only a full public inquiry will be acceptable, that former Ministers responsible for handling the epidemic—all of whom seem to have been conveniently shuffled away or retired—must answer in public for their actions, and that the Prime Minister, who said at the end of March that he was taking personal charge of the crisis, must also give evidence? Is the Prime Minister still in personal charge of the crisis? The Leader of the House refused to answer that question earlier.

Does the Secretary of State agree that a full public inquiry need not take anything like as long or cost as much as, for example, the BSE inquiry, because the science of foot and mouth is already better understood and the period of events to be investigated is very much shorter?

Has there been any change in the basis on which the figures for foot and mouth cases are calculated? In advance of a public inquiry, will the Secretary of State arrange for a qualified statistician to undertake an independent audit of the figures produced by the old Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food throughout the period of the epidemic?

I note the Secretary of State's comments on relaxing some of the footpath restrictions. Does she accept that footpaths in or near infected areas should be opened only after a proper and rigorous local assessment of the risks, in consultation with all the interested parties?

Does the right hon. Lady accept that the proposal for a 20-day ban on the movement of livestock, announced as one of her predecessor's knee-jerk responses in April, is unworkable in practice and should be withdrawn and completely rethought?

The Secretary of State did not refer specifically to vaccination. Will she start talks with other European Union member states on whether the EU-wide policy should now be fundamentally reviewed? Do the Government plan to carry out serological testing, and if so, will the results be published, and what will be done with the animals that test positive? Does she recognise that compensation is needed not only for farmers whose animals have been slaughtered but for many others who have suffered unrecoverable losses as a direct result of the epidemic?

When will the Government introduce a full recovery plan for the livestock industry, the rest of the rural economy, tourism and other countryside businesses, including the equestrian sector? How many businesses have benefited so far from the measures announced by the rural task force and, in the absence of the Minister for the Environment this morning, will the Secretary of State tell us who is now chairing the rural task force?

Do the Government accept that the epidemic should never have reached its present scale, and that if prompt effective action had been taken at the outset, as I suggested in the House and as inquiries into the previous outbreak made clear, far fewer animals would have died, far fewer family businesses would have been destroyed, far less damage to farming and the rural economy would have occurred, and hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money would have been saved? The crisis has inflicted hideous suffering and damage on human beings,

animals, the countryside and the economy. It has not been handled well and has still not been resolved; it needs the Government's most urgent and continuing attention.

Margaret Beckett: I do not know whether it is gratifying that the hon. Gentleman has emerged from the rigours of the election campaign with his attitudes and his amour propre undamaged by contact with reality. He asked a string of questions and made a string of comments; I shall endeavour to respond to most of his questions.

The hon. Gentleman asked if there had been any change to the basis on which figures are calculated; the answer is no. He asked whether paths would be reopened only after local consultation. I shall come back to that issue in a second. I apologise for the fact that he received a copy of the statement late; he will not receive a statement so late again, but he will appreciate that on a day when there are no ordinary parliamentary questions, there is less time than usual to clarify things and get a copy to him. In view of what he said about accurate statistics, I am sure that he also appreciates that we wanted to make the latest possible figures available to the House.

As I said, the hon. Gentleman asked about reopening footpaths. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Rural Affairs will announce today the date on which we propose that the blanket closures should be lifted. In the interim, as I made plain in the statement, it will be possible for local authorities to make representations if, for some reason, they feel that blanket closure is necessary in their areas. Of course, it will also be possible for local authorities to continue to exercise the range of powers that they previously enjoyed. I expect that decisions will be taken with due sensitivity to local situations.

The hon. Gentleman asked about instigating talks with the European Union on vaccination policy. Of course, that remains under consideration, and I have little doubt that in the aftermath of the outbreak, there is bound to be further discussion of all those issues. He asked whether we planned to carry out serological testing. I was not quite sure what point he was making, as the Government are already carrying out extensive serological testing. I cannot recall offhand whether the House has previously been made aware of the fact that when the outbreak began, we inherited a capacity to test some 400 serological samples. I have rather lost track of the latest figures, as they are rising rapidly, but we now have the capacity to test between 60,000 and 70,000 samples. We are continuing to increase that capacity because we perceive the need to carry out thorough and extensive testing.

The hon. Gentleman again asked for compensation for, as far as I could make out, any unrecovered losses by anybody in any circumstances. He will know that, sadly, no Government have felt able to make such a commitment—and this one is no exception. We shall certainly introduce a recovery plan, but I cannot give a date for that at present. I cannot add to what I said in the statement about the number of businesses that are benefiting from the resources that have been made available because, obviously, that is being handled by regional development agencies. The rural task force is chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Rural Affairs, which is why he is here now.

I think that I have now covered most of the questions that the hon. Gentleman asked. However, he also made a number of observations. He said that the depth and urgency of the crisis was evident; I do not dissent from that at all. He said that reshuffles in Whitehall were irrelevant; of course, the changes that have been and continue to be made have not disrupted the handling of the outbreak, which is still a very high priority indeed for my Department.

Not for the first time, the hon. Gentleman accused my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, East and Wallsend (Mr. Brown), who is now the Minister for Work, of making certain statements—but he will find that those statements were not wholly accurately reported. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the need for a new policy, criticised the Government for saying that we were on the home straight, and made his usual call for a full public inquiry. There is no point in his continuing to pretend that the Government are not committed to having an inquiry when the outbreak is over. We have repeatedly made it plain that we have every intention of having an inquiry—[HON. MEMBERS: "When?"] When the outbreak is over. If hon. Members listen to the "Today" programme, as I am sure they do assiduously, they will have heard the president of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons giving the interviewer what were, for the hon. Gentleman, all the wrong answers, by saying that the Government were not handling the issue badly and that we should not have the inquiry until the outbreak is over. That remains the Government's view.

There will be an inquiry, but the farming industry and rural communities most want to see an inquiry that is carried out fully and effectively, and uncovers the answers as expeditiously as possible and at as low a cost as possible. It is hard to listen to Opposition Members go on about how disgusting it is that the Government are not pledged to hold a full public inquiry when the Conservatives resisted right to the end of their term in office an inquiry into the BSE outbreak.

The hon. Gentleman said that an inquiry need not take long or cost much, but he continued this morning his practice—which I also observed from my former position on the Front Bench—throughout the outbreak. He and his colleagues spend all their time trying to think of something they can ask the Government to do that they will refuse to do. If he spent more of his time assisting the Government in getting across the messages about what matters in the countryside—to continue to bear down on the disease and to take the precautions that will reduce its spread—he would gain more respect, in the House and outside.

Joyce Quin (Gateshead, East and Washington, West): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. As a former Minister, I strongly support the creation of her Department and the fact that she will examine the revival of the rural economy as a whole, and the important role that agriculture will play in that. I also welcome the fact that there will be an inquiry and I look forward to defending many aspects of the Government's record in handling the outbreak.

Once again, the Conservative spokesman seems to be unwilling to be distracted by mere facts. Instead of being in advance of the Government, he was very much behind us in several of the measures that we took. Comparisons

are often made with 1967, but it is the huge differences that strike me. In particular, the farmer at the source of the outbreak in 1967 reported the disease within two days, but in this case it was not reported at all.

I hope that the maximum amount of information will be available to farmers engaged in restocking, and that the Department will pull out all the stops to work with the agricultural sector to provide for its long-term future.

Margaret Beckett: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her comments, and I take the opportunity to pay tribute to her for the tremendous amount of work that she did in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I regret that she has chosen to devote more of her time to the interests of her constituents, and not to play a part in the Department in the future. I also acknowledge the real justice of many of her strictures about the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo). I also agree with my right hon. Friend that the differences between now and the 1967 outbreak are stark, and that the delay in reporting is the most significant difference—as she rightly identified. I have been very impressed with the mechanisms that I have found in the Department for consultation with the wider farming and rural community. We will continue to use those mechanisms, not least when discussing matters such as restocking and how to spread information about it. Again, I am grateful to her for her remarks in that respect.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): I welcome the Secretary of State to her new post, and thank her for her statement. However, will she clarify the nature of the public inquiry that she announced? Will it be as full, comprehensive and independent as the BSE inquiry under Lord Phillips, or will it be delayed, incomplete and shoved under the carpet? We need a report that shows precisely how the Government handled the foot and mouth crisis.

The crisis has cost about £1 billion, so is it not clear that there needs to be more investment in the veterinary service, as it is vets who will advise the Government? Also, should not more advice be sought from independent scientific sources, so that the real nature of animal diseases can be identified more clearly? That would help us to cope better with any future outbreak.

Does the right hon. Lady agree that the new Department should do more than merely respond to the rural task force? It should develop strategies and policies that can be debated early in this Parliament, thus ensuring that the Department gets on top of the integration of rural policy and the policies of the former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. In that way, it would be evident that a new direction and culture had been adopted.

Finally, will the Secretary of State confirm that there will be no delay in opening up Dartmoor? That is very important, given the start of the summer tourist season. We have heard that Dartmoor may not be fully reopened. I hope that that is not correct, but I should be grateful if she could investigate the matter urgently. As she will be aware, in the far south-west the summer season and the opening up of Dartmoor are extremely important.

Margaret Beckett: First, I cannot add anything to what has been said from this Dispatch Box many times already about the inquiry into the foot and mouth outbreak.

[Margaret Beckett]

I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government have no intention of not having an inquiry. We shall require the inquiry to be complete, not least because it will nail comprehensively much of the nonsense and many of the myths that have been spread, both in the House and outside.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the need for further investment to strengthen the veterinary service, and we shall, of course, consider such matters in the future. Speaking from memory, I think that about 10 times as many vets have been working on the outbreak than are normally available full time. That provision is temporary, and it is to be hoped that so many vets will not be needed in the ordinary course of events. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we should strengthen access to scientific advice, but I do not link that requirement to our knowledge of the disease. In many ways, we know a great deal about the disease; the question is how we handle outbreaks such as we have experienced. I certainly share his wish for a new direction and culture when it comes to discussing the rural community's concerns and affairs more widely and in the context of sustainable development.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Dartmoor. As I said in my statement, we shall want as much ground as possible to be opened up, subject to the balance of proper control of the disease. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Rural Affairs will make some inquiries about the position in Dartmoor, and will make contact with the hon. Gentleman if he has something useful to convey.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be aware that many small farmers who have lost herds are in very real financial difficulty. Will she give urgent consideration to the payment of compensation, to ensure that people do not wait an unnecessarily long time? Will she also look at the subject of artificial insemination, which is causing considerable difficulty for firms in my constituency? They have been directly affected, but feel that the veterinary decision that has been taken has not been followed up by a clear policy statement from the Department. Will she look at those matters very urgently?

Margaret Beckett: I certainly undertake to do so. Again, I will contact my hon. Friend if I have something to report.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): The Secretary of State will understand the sense of embattlement, claustrophobia, foreboding, fear and anger in my constituency and in neighbouring constituencies in Lancashire, where there have been 80 cases of foot and mouth disease since the general election was announced. In addition, 326 farms have been culled out, and nearly 250,000 animals slaughtered. Will she recognise that the first service that she can do is to acknowledge how serious the crisis is locally? However the figures look nationally, to people on the ground the crisis remains urgent, terrible and present. Will she further realise that, although most people think that the cull has been handled sensitively and efficiently, there is a terrible problem with the cleaning-up operation because of the enormous bottlenecks, and that

attention needs to be focused on cleaning, cleansing and disinfecting and on ultimately getting people back into business and addressing the delays?

The Secretary of State will also recognise that business in my constituency, which has been effectively closed down since the very first outbreaks in Hawes and Lancashire—the present crisis has only multiplied the difficulties—is now in serious difficulty, faces a summer of loss and a potential winter of bankruptcy. Will she therefore announce that the rate relief scheme, which is due to finish at the end of the month, will be renewed; and that Government aid, which for Yorkshire and Humberside is only £2.5 million and was announced before my constituency had any cases, will be renewed and adjusted in proportion to an outbreak that in Craven at least is beginning to look as if it will be of Cumbrian proportions? Does she realise that Government funding via the Countryside Agency to match voluntary contributions finishes at the end of the month, before we shall have a chance to benefit?

Will the Secretary of State look at the possibility of attracting more tourists to the area, bearing in mind that 90 per cent. of the tourists to the Yorkshire Dales are national not international, and that of those, 80 per cent. are regional? Rather than attract Americans back, if we could get tourists back from Bradford, Leeds and Manchester, it would do us a service. Will she deal with those matters and recognise how sensitive and raw-edged people's feelings are?

Margaret Beckett: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the sensitive way in which he has recognised and spoken of the range of issues. Of course I recognise how badly his constituents feel. Although I do not represent a farming constituency, when I lived in Lincolnshire some 10 years after the previous outbreak I was well aware of the remaining grief and deep feelings of mourning of those who experienced the 1967 outbreak. I am under no illusions at all about how deep the grief will have gone within his community and the many others that have been affected. I do indeed recognise those concerns.

I recognise the validity of the right hon. Gentleman's other points about the potential for 'bottlenecks' in the cleaning-up process, the range of businesses affected and the fact that it was some time ago that the dates for the support schemes were first set. The Government will have to consider all those issues. I cannot give him any information today, but I undertake consider the points that he raised, not least his final, extremely pertinent point about domestic tourism. He will appreciate that that is part of the reason for the thrust of the announcement that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Rural Affairs will make later today. We are seeking to get the message across. I have heard some anecdotal evidence of how, in various areas as restrictions have been lifted, the recovery of tourism and other businesses has been speedier than people had feared and that people have begun to recover losses more speedily than had been feared. It is essential that we do everything that we can to minimise that damage and I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we shall do so.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): My constituency is next door to Skipton and Ripon, and is now gripped by the foot and mouth outbreak. The right hon. Member for

Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) talked about the culling being handled sensitively. Many of my constituents have contacted me about the brutal way in which animals have been culled, mentioning in particular the so-called Liverpool team. I invite the Secretary of State to comment on why, four months into the crisis, we still read horror stories about killings that have gone wrong.

There is one other practical point. Four and a half months into the crisis, why cannot we have proper disinfectant baths on our country roads? So many people say to me, "How in God's name is it possible for foot and mouth to spread like wildfire, when everyone has been told of the importance of biosecurity measures?" My right hon. Friend mentioned those in her statement.

Finally, my right hon. Friend said that she would be visiting the worst affected areas in northern England. I take it that she will visit the Ribble Valley, Skipton and Ripon, and my constituency.

Margaret Beckett: May I say to my hon. Friend, with proper respect, that I hope that this does not become a competition to be the worst affected area as a means of ensuring that Ministers visit a particular part of the country? I understand the concerns that have been expressed. I have not heard all the anecdotal evidence to which he refers, but of course I am aware that there have been occasions when distress has been caused as a result of the culling operation.

With regard to my hon. Friend's query about disinfectant baths, I hope that the House is aware that the key means by which the disease is spread is the movement of vehicles and of people, and in particular, close contact with animals. He is right that everyone should be mindful of that and of the precautions that need to be taken. I suggest that we all, as politicians, continue to urge those precautions on our constituents to bring about a continued diminution in the already substantially reduced number of affected areas.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The impact of foot and mouth on the Ribble Valley has been enormous. The Minister has spoken of the national impact, but in the villages that have been directly affected, such as West Bradford, Gisburn, Paythorne, Sawley, Rimington, Downham and other areas near Clitheroe, the impact has been devastating and total. Farmers still speak about the 1967 outbreak and remember it as though it occurred yesterday.

The present outbreak has affected not just those directly involved in farming, but the wider community. There is a sense of grieving for the communities throughout my area and, I am sure, in neighbouring areas. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the culling operation is carried out as humanely as possible? Stories have been spread about the inhumane culling of animals. We heard about that before and thought that it had been corrected. It must not be allowed to continue.

With regard to the welfare package and the compensation that has been made available to farmers whether or not they have been directly affected by foot and mouth, will the Secretary of State ensure that it gets through as quickly as possible? I understand that some farmers have been waiting 10 to 12 weeks for money, which cannot be allowed.

We have heard stories that the vehicles used to transport carcasses are not properly disinfected, and that stops are made for tea and coffee on the way to the areas

where the carcasses are to be laid. That must not be allowed. Transportation must be direct from the farms to the pits. The Secretary of State said that she would visit the north of England. As she knows, in Gisburn I have the Army operations depot, and the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has a base there. Will she come and see the operation first-hand, speak with those who are directly affected by the outbreak and listen to the ideas and practical suggestions of farmers and those in associated industries to ameliorate the position in the short term? Will she then produce practical suggestions for the long-term recovery of farming in our area?

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before the Secretary of State replies, I must appeal for short questions. I want to call as many hon. Members as possible, and I cannot do so under these circumstances.

Margaret Beckett: I shall respond briefly. I understand the comments of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) about the feelings and concerns of his constituents. He made a number of observations about people waiting for compensation, and suggestions for dealing with problems in the handling of transport. It would be very helpful to my Department if people who have detailed evidence, whether of delays in payment or, indeed, of incidents of the kind to which he referred, made it available. He will know that one such anecdote repeated 10 times gives the impression of 10 such events. We shall of course look at any concerns that are expressed, but evidence would help.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): When the Government announced their enhanced support for the business rate relief scheme for some councils, Stafford borough was not one of them. Given my right hon. Friend's responsibility for all rural businesses, will she take an early opportunity to consider representations received not just from Stafford but from several other councils about why they believe that businesses affected in their areas deserve that enhanced Government support?

Margaret Beckett: I undertake to my hon. Friend that we shall look again at that case. He will know that those issues have been raised. We shall of course keep them under consideration.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): What steps have the Government taken to strengthen the inspection at ports of entry into this country of meat that has been subject in the past only to random checking? What steps have they taken to review the labelling of imported meat products that are subsequently sold to consumers in this country?

Margaret Beckett: Steps have certainly been taken. I do not have the details about my person, but I know that more advice has been given to the inspectorates at the ports that there should be more stringent enforcement and that, again, the issues are kept continually under review. The hon. Gentleman will know that we continue to consider issues such as labelling to see what can be done to ensure that people are given accurate information. As I say, I do not have the detailed information with me, but if there is anything further that I can add, I shall certainly write to him.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Many carcasses were disposed of at the Erin Void landfill site in

[Mr. Harry Barnes]

my constituency. When the manager of the site first went there, he said that he was astonished at how close the communities of Duckmanton and Poolsbrook were to it. Will that be taken into account if future use of such areas is considered? Perhaps those communities have had enough. Could communities that have suffered receive some compensation by, for example, extending landfill tax from 20 to 100 per cent?

Margaret Beckett: Obviously, the Government will have to look over time at issues such as the aftermath and the handling of matters such as landfill tax. I know that the Minister for Rural Affairs, who chairs the rural task force, has taken on board my hon. Friend's remarks.

With regard to the handling of cases on the particular landfill site to which my hon. Friend referred, I am sure that he will know that no such use is made of sites without the most thorough consideration of both environmental and health aspects. I know that he will have taken on board my remarks at the outset that we will not use such sites unless we absolutely have to.

Andrew Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her appointment and wish her well in making the new Department work effectively. Will she join me in congratulating the very large number of walkers who have behaved extremely responsibly throughout the crisis and shown great restraint? Will she assure them that she is putting pressure on local authorities that have kept footpaths closed long after it was necessary to do so to ensure that all footpaths that can be opened are open for the school holidays?

Margaret Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks. He is right that the walkers of this country have shown the proper respect and concern for the overall welfare of the countryside that we would expect of them. That has been most noticeable. I am sure that he will have noted the burden of my observations about path closure. He is right that in some areas it has been difficult to see how continued closure has been justified. However, where there are genuine local concerns, local authorities will remain able to make that case known and to have it heeded. Obviously, safe handling is essential, although, as he rightly says, it is also essential that we make our countryside available to those who wish to walk in it where it is safe to do so.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): In wishing the right hon. Lady well in her very important task, may I ask her two questions? First, will she please have an early discussion with all hon. Members whose constituencies have been affected by this dreadful disease? I have in mind a proper forum that she would attend and where she would have proper discussion. There is a widespread feeling that the epidemic has been badly handled in many respects, and we could doubtless advise her in that regard. Secondly, will she bear in mind that there will be no final satisfaction unless a proper, independent public inquiry is conducted at the right time?

Margaret Beckett: Of course, I shall take on board the hon. Gentleman's observations. He will appreciate that there are always enormous pressures on the time of

Ministers when a new Department is set up. I know that he and the whole House will want Ministers to give top priority to dealing with the practical day-to-day issues, which may help us in bringing the epidemic to an end. I regret that he should repeat what has occasionally been heard from Opposition Members about the bad handling of the outbreak. I remind them that—[*Interruption.*] It is in the nature of things that no one is infallible, except possibly the Pope when he is speaking *ex cathedra*, but not even he is infallible all the time. [*Interruption.*] The matter is one of definition. Of course, I fully expect that everybody will have made mistakes. Indeed, it may even be that Opposition Members, including Front Benchers, have occasionally been wrong.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I welcome the right hon. Lady's full and detailed statement and also the fact that she has made it very soon in the new Parliament. Will she respond to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) and tell us whether she will extend the business rate relief scheme beyond the period for which it is scheduled to run? Will she also give me an answer on why the borough of Macclesfield, which I have the honour of representing in this House, is not included in the scheme, even though 90 per cent. of its geographical area is rural and agricultural? Furthermore, will she confirm that it would be irresponsible and wrong to open at this time footpaths that run through livestock farms? Will she also ensure that milk collectors properly disinfect their vehicles on each and every occasion they visit a livestock farm to collect milk?

Margaret Beckett: On the first issue, I cannot add to what I told the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry). We are conscious of the point that he made about the rate relief scheme and, as with other issues, we are taking it under active consideration. I am afraid that I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a more helpful reply about the position of Macclesfield borough council than my right hon. Friend the Minister for Work gave when he made his last statement as Minister of Agriculture. I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman will continue to press his case, as he always does so effectively.

I wholeheartedly endorse the rest of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, in which he put his finger on a number of key issues. It is important for all those who travel in the countryside to observe the correct precautions. Obviously, we are all conscious of what is needed to keep the disease at bay and, it is to be hoped, to bring the outbreak to an end. That is the consideration that local authorities and others have in mind with regard to footpaths. There should be no question of dispute about a footpath in an area where infection still exists. The key is to keep people and infection away from livestock, and I assure him that that point will be under consideration, but I am sure that he would be the last person to suggest that continued blanket closure, potentially throughout the country, is required.

Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): May I offer my warmest congratulations to my right hon. Friend on her new appointment? I am sure that she will do a fine job.

My right hon. Friend will know that the spread of foot and mouth in 1967 was much slower and narrower than on this occasion. As has been pointed out, that is due not

only to the notification time on first discovery, but to the trading patterns of the industry and the availability of abattoirs. Will she engage with the industry, or is she already engaged with it, to consider ways of reducing the average mobility of livestock, so that the extent and speed of spread of any future outbreak can be limited? Will she weigh the cost of such changes against the massive cost of an outbreak not only to agriculture, but to the tourism industry?

Margaret Beckett: I thank my hon. Friend for his congratulations. His last point is correct; from the beginning, the Government have been mindful of the impact on the whole economy, not only on rural areas and agriculture. He is also correct about the differences, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, East and Wallsend (Mr. Brown) highlighted, between the 1967 outbreak and the current one. The delay in notification and different trading patterns in agriculture are crucial.

I am not sure whether the argument about abattoirs is as strong. There were many more abattoirs in 1967, but that did not prevent the number of cases from being substantially greater, even though notification occurred much earlier and the disease was much easier to detect. The significance of the number of abattoirs is therefore in dispute. However, whatever discussions and inquiry follow the outbreak, animal movement will form a key part of the consideration.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The anxieties and severe problems that the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) identified are not local, but relevant to all affected areas, including the south-west, where they are reflected in my constituency and adjoining constituencies.

When the Secretary of State reads *Hansard* tomorrow, she will regret the complacency on which some of her answers verge. The Government must accept that their handling of the matter has been confusing and complex. The crisis has been difficult to tackle, but I hope that she agrees that it is vital to improve the clarity and certainty with which the Government deal with the problem.

We all accept and welcome the relaxation of movement restrictions. However, does the Secretary of State accept that the biggest problem that confronts those who are indirectly affected in agriculture or related industries is lack of clarity about their cash flow, and uncertainty about compensation and their future? Those are urgent matters. If she continues to give an impression of complacency, the Government will be held to account.

Margaret Beckett: Of course I accept that there is always a greater need for clarity and certainty, not least in making information available to those who need Government support or seek compensation. However, I wholly reject any charge of complacency. I do not feel the slightest sense of complacency about the handling of the outbreak, and I share the anxiety that has been expressed by hon. Members. Nevertheless, I am not prepared to accept unjustified criticism of the Government without responding to it.

Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her new job. I was delighted by the establishment of the Department, which is the way forward for the rural parts of my constituency.

My right hon. Friend knows that there was a recent outbreak of the disease in Westerdale in the North York moors national park and that the rural economy, especially tourism, in Castleton and Danby has been devastated over many months. I wholeheartedly support the remarks of the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry).

When the regional development agency and others put together the recovery plan, especially for Yorkshire, will my right hon. Friend ensure that the national parks are included in its construction? Will she also make sure that small rural business, such as those in Castleton and Danby, are not forgotten? Sometimes their remoteness makes them believe that they are out of touch with developments. It is essential that they are not excluded and forgotten.

Margaret Beckett: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. Of course we shall take account of the problems that arise in the national parks, and involve them. I do not believe that any hon. Member is under an illusion about the difficulties that small, rural businesses have experienced. Although some of the communities to which he referred are small, they are often well known and popular with a much wider group in the community. I therefore assure him and his constituents that there is no question of overlooking their anxieties, fears and problems. The Government will endeavour to tackle them as fully as possible. I know that he shares the view, which the Government have repeatedly expressed, that we can get on with the task better when we bring the outbreak of the disease to an end.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): I welcome the Secretary of State's decision to relax the movement restrictions on livestock for slaughter. However, I want to highlight another problem that is looming in the upland areas of northern England, including my constituency, as we approach the annual sheep sales. Unless movement restrictions are lifted, the sellers of breeding ewe lambs will not be able to sell to their normal traditional markets in non-infected areas in the south of England. The lambs would then end up being fattened for slaughter, and going into an already over-subscribed market. Will she consider relaxing the restrictions on movement of breeding ewes under careful controls to prevent a considerable welfare problem?

Will the Secretary of State clarify who will be the next de facto Minister of Agriculture? Will it be the Minister for Rural Affairs, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, or Lord Whitty? We would like to know.

Margaret Beckett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome for the change in movement restrictions. I assure him that, although it has not featured particularly in today's statement for obvious reasons—I have been seeking to give the House the opportunity to consider what has been happening in the interim period—we are all mindful of the further developments that will naturally be taking place in agriculture, and of the impact that they will have on the market. I cannot give him an announcement today, but I can certainly tell him that the Government are mindful of the seriousness of the issues that he raises, and that we are keeping them under active consideration.

[Margaret Beckett]

On who is the de facto Minister of Agriculture, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for highlighting the strength of my excellent ministerial team. He is right in detecting that my noble Friend Lord Whitty will be dealing day to day with many of the issues, but we are conscious as a ministerial team that there is much overlap and we intend to work closely together to keep a close grip on the issues. With regard to who speaks in this House, it will primarily and usually be me.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Some time ago, when the Secretary of State was making her statement, she said that she was hoping for a return to normality in the farming industry. May I point out to her that if there is a long-term 20-day restriction on movement of livestock, there will be no return of the livestock industry at all in many areas? The Government may learn many lessons from foot and mouth disease, but such a long-term 20-day restriction will make livestock farming in upland Scotland, Wales and many areas of upland England non-viable. Would not it be an irony if a farming business were to survive the ravages of mad cow disease and foot and mouth, only to find an administrative regime making its livestock business non-viable? Do not do it.

Margaret Beckett: It is hard to find any phrase to describe the end of the outbreak. On this occasion, we used the phrase "return to normality", which is not subject to challenge or query. Of course, I take the hon. Gentleman's point. We have been consulting on some of the proposals on restrictions on movement and we are aware that there would not be a return to precisely the circumstances that obtained before the outbreak of the disease. There has been consultation, and Ministers are considering the outcome and the responses to it. I am conscious that the proposals are not at all popular with many people, clearly including some who have spoken to the hon. Gentleman. I am also aware of people's anxiety about the impact of the proposals on the future of livestock farming. However, the House would genuinely consider the Government to be in dereliction of our duty if we did not consider whether changes needed to be made in the light of what we have all learned about the potential impact of the disease in the circumstances of today's agriculture.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): On 9 March, American scientists on Plum Island offered the Government the loan, on trial, of a portable computerised device that can detect foot and mouth disease in stock before any symptoms show. This device could have had a significant impact on tracking the development of the disease, and could perhaps have saved many millions of pounds. What progress have the Government made in pursuing this kind offer?

Margaret Beckett: I am aware of the reports, which have appeared before. I am also aware that that is only one of a number of miracle techniques that, if only the Government had used them, would have prevented the outbreak, probably from starting and certainly from spreading. I do not recall the precise detail of that to which the hon. Gentleman referred, although I am aware that similar claims have been made, for example, of a

software programme originating in New Zealand, which has been used to some degree, but which is not wholly applicable here.

We must all bear it in mind that there are all sorts of ideas, offers and proposals that can be made and that might assist in dealing with some of those matters, but, as far as I have been able to judge, no one has been able to show that there is some miracle technique that the Government could have used that would have prevented the development and progress of the disease.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): The Secretary of State may be aware that one of the major mass burial sites lies in my constituency at Throckmorton, but is she aware of how serious the continuing impact of that site is on those who live in the immediate vicinity, despite it not being used for a considerable period? The odour from the rotting carcasses is a great deal more serious than was expected and those living in the immediate vicinity find that they cannot sell their houses, which has serious consequences for their personal lives. Will she or the appropriate member of her ministerial team agree to meet me and a small group from the Throckmorton airfield site to discuss its implications for their private lives?

Margaret Beckett: I can certainly undertake to consider the hon. Gentleman's request and of course I take the point about the impact that he describes. Equally, I am sure that he takes the point that, sadly, there is no way to deal with a disease of such gravity and scale that does not involve unpleasant impact for all concerned. That is one of many reasons why the Government's key priority has to be to bring it to an end as speedily as possible.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): In Somerset, we thought that we had escaped the worst ravages of the disease, only to find our area reinfected when the spotlight of media and politics was elsewhere. Does the right hon. Lady understand how many businesses in Somerset and across the west country face desperate circumstances? Some are in difficulty as a direct result of disease precautions and some have nothing to do with agriculture or tourism. Certainly, few are directly connected with the shibboleth of footpath closure.

Does the right hon. Lady understand that the one thing that those businesses want at this stage is, to put it crudely, cash? They want cash beyond the scope of rates relief to enable them to survive until the end of the year. Does she further understand that, for many of my constituents, the task force seems to have no concept of either the urgency or the scale of the problem in the rural economy?

Margaret Beckett: Of course I accept that those who are affected in any way, shape or form hope that the Government can find some means to assist them. Sadly, such compensation or support, if it is not direct compensation, cannot always be made available. One of the first steps that I took in the Department was to ask questions and to push for speedier handling of cases in which people have grounds or opportunities to claim under schemes that have been made available. We shall continue to keep up that pressure, but I can only say to the hon. Gentleman, without in any way disputing the seriousness of the position that he described and the

concerns of his constituents, that I fear that it may not always be possible to assist everyone in the way that they would hope.

Tony Baldry (Banbury): I was surprised to be approached yesterday by a farming constituent whose livestock were slaughtered at Easter who has yet to receive any compensation whatever. Will the Secretary of State undertake that, if we give her private office chapter and verse on such cases, they will be investigated as a matter of priority?

Margaret Beckett: We have reinstated the Members' hotline, and the point of that is to ensure that cases can be considered speedily if they come to Members' attention. Like the hon. Gentleman, I am a little surprised to hear of such an outcome, but I undertake that, if he provides us with details, we shall endeavour to ensure that it is properly investigated.

Mis. Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I congratulate the right hon. Lady and the Minister on their recent appointments.

I endorse the call for the right hon. Lady not to introduce the 20-day standstill rule, which would simply compound the utter ruin that many farmers face, particularly in North Yorkshire. Incredibly, the Vale of York has not yet had one case of direct infection. Will she today express her regret that the rural task force may have brought unnecessary force to bear on North Yorkshire county council, making the council reach a decision—during the general election and while county councillors were being re-elected—to reopen many footpaths, which will result in contact between livestock and human beings? One particular footpath at Tockwith is causing concern because it is less than two miles from an infected area. Surely such footpaths should not be reopened at this time.

Margaret Beckett: I have taken on board the comment of the hon. Lady and others, and I suspect that more people will express their anxiety about the 20-day movement proposal. I am not aware of the issue that she raises about specific footpaths. She will recall that I said in my statement that we are mindful of getting the balance right between risk of infection and freedom of movement. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Rural Affairs will look into the issue that she raises, and the more detail that she can give us, the more helpful it will be.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): First, will the Secretary of State agree to meet her opposite numbers in the Welsh Assembly to find out where the delays in payments to businesses and farmers in Wales are originating? Secondly, will she commit to responding personally to me if I contact her in writing about some form D notices that were imposed in my constituency on the basis of erroneous judgments about the presence of the infection?

Margaret Beckett: It has always been my practice in successive Departments to attempt to reply to hon. Members as speedily as practicable. I was not aware of the potential delays to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but I shall draw the matter to the attention of relevant colleagues.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Livestock farmers in England who apply to the right hon. Lady's Department

for grants to convert to organic production, as many are doing in the aftermath of foot and mouth disease, are being told that unlike the position in Wales, where inspectors are still visiting farms, inspectors may not visit farms in England until after an outbreak is over. Will the right hon. Lady explain why there should be that difference between Wales and England? Perhaps she will consider allowing inspectors to visit farms in England.

While organic conversion grants are still being paid to arable farmers in England, is there a risk that the sums available from the Treasury for the purpose of organic conversion will be used up purely on arable farms, making it harder for livestock farmers to get organic conversion grants later?

Margaret Beckett: The hon. Gentleman's final point is valid and we shall certainly bear it in mind. I am not aware of the specific distinctions that he makes in respect of patterns in Wales. The nature of his concern was not wholly clear to me—[*Interruption.*] I understood his point about inspections, but it was not wholly clear to me why the differences that he identified are arising, or in what circumstances. It may simply be that the people who would have been available are tied up with other matters. I shall certainly make inquiries into that.

On the hon. Gentleman's general point about the future of the farming industry, of course the Government have that under consideration. It is very much part of the discussions that are taking place about the farm recovery plan and the wider discussions that need to be had about the overall and long-term future of sustainable agriculture and of the rural and farming communities.

BILLS PRESENTED

EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (FINANCE)

Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, supported by Mr. Secretary Straw, Mr. Secretary Blunkett, Secretary Margaret Beckett, Secretary Clare Short, Mr. Secretary Byers, Mr. Andrew Smith, Ms Secretary Hewitt, Secretary Estelle Morris, Dawn Primarolo, Mr. Paul Boateng and Ruth Kelly, presented a Bill to amend the definition of "the Treaties" and "the Community Treaties" in section 1(2) of the European Communities Act 1972 so as to include the decision of 29th September 2000 of the Council on the Communities' system of own resources: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 1].

HOMELESSNESS

Mr. Secretary Byers, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Milburn, Mr. Secretary Murphy, Ms Rosie Winterton and Ms Sally Keeble, presented a Bill to make further provision about the functions of local housing authorities relating to homelessness and the allocation of housing accommodation; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 2].

EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (AMENDMENT)

Mr. Secretary Straw, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer,

[Margaret Beckett]

Mr. Robin Cook, Mr. Secretary Blunkett, Secretary Margaret Beckett, Secretary Clare Short, Mr. Secretary Hoon, Secretary Hewitt, the Solicitor-General and Mr. Peter Hain, presented a Bill to make provision consequential on the Treaty signed at Nice on 26th February 2001 amending the Treaty on European Union, the Treaties establishing the European Communities and certain related Acts: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 3].

CIVIL DEFENCE (GRANT)

Mr. Secretary Blunkett, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Straw, Mr. Secretary Hoon and Mr. John Denham, presented a Bill to replace section 3 of the Civil Defence Act 1948 in so far as it applies to authorities in England or Wales: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 4].

Point of Order

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. When I returned home last night and listened to the BBC news for the south-east, Lord Whitty was reported as having announced that there will be a full-scale public inquiry into the foot and mouth outbreak, whereas the Secretary of State cast some doubt on that in her statement today. First, through your good offices, Mr. Speaker, could I ask that accurate language is used when Ministers are talking about this sensitive and important matter? Secondly, if there is to be a full-scale public inquiry into the outbreak, could you use your good offices to ensure that the House of Commons hears about it first?

Mr. Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman could have put that matter to the Secretary of State when she was making her statement. I cannot be responsible for the Minister's words. I am sure that an appropriate announcement will be made about any public inquiry.

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[SECOND DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [20 June].

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—
[Mr. Sheerman.]

Question again proposed.

Public Services

1.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Estelle Morris): I congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, on your re-election. I apologise to you and to all Members for not being able to attend the end of the debate. I hope that the House will accept my apologies, and I shall enjoy reading the comments of new and not so new Members in *Hansard*.

I shall begin on a point of unanimity. I am pleased that the Opposition have chosen public services for today's debate on the Queen's Speech, because, from wherever we come, we now know that the delivery of public services is, as ever, of prime importance. In this Parliament, there will be an improvement in the delivery of those services. What makes that so important, especially to my Department, is that without good delivery of public services, so much else does not happen. They are the key to individual fulfilment and to people's life chances, and they make a real difference to the quality of life of individuals, communities and the nation.

I am conscious of the fact that we are all users of public services, but many people work in that sector and serve us well. I want to put on the record my thanks to the many hundreds of thousands of people who spend their working lives in public service and do an excellent job. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I particularly want to thank those in education from classroom assistants and nursery nurses to teachers, others who work in schools and those who work in further or higher education. What they do is much appreciated, and the quality of their work can determine whether as individuals we flourish and whether as a nation we succeed.

The Department for Education and Skills is a new Department that will play a crucial role in delivering change and improvement in a key public service. Our job is to ensure that people, at whatever age or stage in their lives, have access to learning and education of the highest quality. For politicians and certainly for a Government, there can be few more important challenges than to get education right. Our obligation to get it right starts with the very young and continues throughout their lives.

In the next few years, the Department will deal with and improve certain areas. We will start by providing good-quality early-years education and child care, and will go on to ensure that we teach the basics well in

school, that we introduce children to a broad curriculum, that we celebrate the diversity in schools, and that we achieve a system that tailors schools to the needs of children and not the other way about. Beyond those compulsory years of schooling, there must be routes into learning that motivate people, that keep them going and that give them the chance to continue learning through further and higher education and in the workplace.

In all that, we must not forget that learning is sometimes for fulfilment and enjoyment as much as it is for employment. That is what our Department is about. If that does not seem a large enough task, on top of that we have the job of guiding education at a time when the system has to respond to a rapidly changing skills base in a world where information and communication technology has transformed the way in which we access information and learning. We have never before had such a challenge.

If we return to our own schooldays, we remember being given text books at the beginning of term. When we put our names in those books, we found that they had been used not just by students in the previous year but by students over the past 10, 15 or even 20 years. Now, day in, day out, the increasing number of information web pages provides a brilliant example of advances in the transmission of knowledge and in access to learning.

Ours must be an education service that does not forget the basics—that never forgets our obligation to reading, writing and number and to nursery education, while also being adaptable and flexible enough to meet challenges that have not faced earlier education services. Education is a key public service, which is why the Government are absolutely right to give it priority. The Queen's Speech made that clear.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Can the Secretary of State assure us that children with special needs will not be forgotten in the ambitious programmes that are being proposed?

Estelle Morris: I know of the hon. Gentleman's interest in this. He has been a keen attender of education debates and education questions, which is much appreciated.

I can give the hon. Gentleman such an assurance, but I am well aware that what is easy to say is more difficult to do. The pledge that I can give is that as we develop our range of policies covering all stages of education we will at all times consider the requirements of children with special educational needs, especially during the early years. All too often, tackling those requirements in secondary schools is tackling them too late. I believe that we will get it right if we build good-quality early-years identification into the system, followed by support for the children and parents involved. I am happy to undertake to do that, and to make progress in the current Parliament as we did in the last.

There is a great deal to do, and I am conscious that in this second Parliament there is much on which to build. Four years of Labour government has brought a real improvement in education, and in life chances. Next September, those who visit schools anywhere in the country—in villages, towns or cities—will not find five, six and seven-year-olds in classes of over 30. Four years ago, they would have found half a million in classes of

that size. In every age range—key stage 1, key stage 2 and secondary—they will see better class sizes and better pupil-teacher ratios. Moreover, we are building on the best batch of literacy and numeracy results that 11-year-olds have ever achieved.

I know the difficulty that schools are experiencing with teacher recruitment. Nothing that I say diminishes it, or fails to acknowledge that a task confronts us. But there are more teachers in schools than there were four years ago, and the quality of those now leaving training is better than it has ever been. One million adults have individual learning accounts, and, thanks to the learning and skills councils, training opportunities and education are for the first time being brought together throughout the sector. After four years of Labour government, 88 per cent. of schools are connected to the internet.

Whatever those statistics tell us, however, I think that the real difference that we have begun to make to the education service is this. Over the past four years, we have started to make people believe that education success is not rationed: it is not limited to certain parts of the country and certain sections of society. That aspiration for all, that belief that we must not turn our back on failure, and that confidence that we have a nation whose members and groups all have talent, ambition and skills—regardless of the postcode into which they are born, of the ethnic minority into which they may have been born and of their gender—represent a cultural change that has begun over those four years. Above all, the progress that we have made has been in embedding that high aspiration and expectation in the system.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): I congratulate the right hon. Lady, and welcome her to her post.

Is the right hon. Lady aware of the great concern expressed on the doorsteps by pupils, parents and teachers about the way in which AS-levels were introduced, and about their long-term consequences? Is she satisfied that it was right to introduce them without any parliamentary debate, and will she instigate an inquiry into the mishandling of the process and its long-term consequences and bring the results to the House?

Estelle Morris: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for those comments and for his congratulations. He is right: there is concern about AS-level examinations at the end of the first year six. That is why, well within a week of taking up the post, I asked the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to conduct an inquiry. My instinct is that we should not go back from supporting a broader curriculum for sixth form students. Indeed, that was the common starting point for us all. It is all right having parliamentary debate, but no one in this House or outside wanted us to keep the narrow range of A-level specialisms. Indeed, compared with our competitor nations, we fall behind by making children specialise too early.

Therefore, I want to keep that breadth, but I think that the right hon. Gentleman is right. My instinct is this. Children are doing two years' study in first year six and second year six. They are interrupted too much by having to prepare for exams at the end of the first year six. It disrupts that continuity and gets in the way of their learning.

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I do not think that that huge change was got entirely right. That is why it is right to ask the QCA to take the matter forward. Although I understand why the right hon. Gentleman makes the point—I accept that people will score points on the issue—it is important not to confuse young people. I give this assurance to sixth formers who are taking those examinations now. They have not wasted their time. Their exams and results will be recognised by universities and employers and they will be praised for having studied a greater breadth of curriculum than they might otherwise have done.

For decades, a fatalism has been embedded into the system: a belief that some schools, some people and some neighbourhoods could not improve. That is beginning to change, too. Whatever the global figures are—I could reel them off until the end of the week almost—this is what is important about the statistics and raw data from the past four years: literacy and numeracy levels have gone up across the nation, but they have gone up more in areas of greatest deprivation.

I was in Tower Hamlets this morning. The greatest thing about Tower Hamlets is that the literacy and numeracy of its 11-year-olds has improved more than in any other borough in the country. If it can be done in Tower Hamlets, it can be done anywhere. It is about embedding high aspiration. GCSE results have improved. That is great, but they have improved the most in education action zones and excellence in cities areas. The excellence challenge, which supports children from deprived backgrounds going into education, is on course too and that will make a difference.

Education action zones and excellence in cities areas serve some of the most difficult communities. For too long, we have said that they have done well, given where they come from. Now we see better attendance rates, lower exclusions and higher achievement rates. If we learn anything from those figures, it is that we should never give up on any school, any child or any local education authority. The evidence of the past four years is that, if we get the strategies right, we can make a difference throughout the nation in every sector of our community.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): In properly commending improvements in schools, will the right hon. Lady recognise what every teacher knows: in schools, there are good cohorts and bad cohorts, and some years can be pretty dreadful and others better? Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect schools year on year to record improvements in things such as SATs—standard assessment tasks. Will she judge schools according to the trend over a reasonable period and remove the pressure on head teachers? Every year, irrespective of the cohort, schools are supposed to be better than the previous year.

Estelle Morris: I accept what the right hon. Gentleman says. I was a teacher and I remember only too well that cohorts tended to differ. What I do not accept—I do not think that there is any evidence for it—is that the whole nation's year-group cohort will differ that much. Therefore, I would expect improvements year on year in the nation's results as a whole. I do not think that we would find too much difference.

We must keep the focus on the results, but we want to move to value added as soon as we can for two reasons. First, as the right hon. Gentleman said, it may appear that a cohort has attained less because of the starting point. Secondly, we must also address the complacency issue, as some schools take in relatively good cohorts but do not improve them to the necessary level.

Therefore, we have not only to avoid complacency but to recognise achievement where it exists. The sooner that we can achieve value-added results, the better it will be. It is about getting the key indices in place, which I reckon we will be able to do in 2002.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): As the Secretary of State knows, I have much sympathy with her comments on value-added league tables. However, the Government were elected in 1997 promising value-added league tables. They have not delivered that promise. Will she give a target date for the implementation of value-added league tables?

Estelle Morris: Had the previous Tory Government done some of the leg work and ground work, we might have been able more quickly to achieve the results that we now hope to achieve in two years. In 1997, when I took up my previous post in the then Department for Education and Employment, I did not find research and plans on value-added results. However, I think—I shall correct myself if I am wrong—that the first value-added results will be made available in 2002.

We have already introduced improvement indices. Although they are not the same as a value-added index, they show schools' annual improvement. I am glad that hon. Members on both sides of the House want both the raw data to measure results nationally and the value-added results.

Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her recent appointment. She will probably know that the improvements in the New Addington education action zone, which she has visited, have been achieved more quickly than those that have been made across the board in Croydon. Does she agree that such improvements are not only about investment but about lifting children's self-esteem? Many children are told by their fathers, if they have a father at home, that they will not be good at school because their fathers themselves were never good at school. We must work both with families and with schools to instil in children the confidence to believe that they can succeed in school. Such action, with investment in education, can deliver previously unimagined results in areas of deprivation.

Estelle Morris: I am happy to agree with my hon. Friend. I had the privilege of visiting with him the New Addington education action zone, of which he has been a strong advocate. I pay tribute to the teachers and others who have worked there. Their message to children of self-esteem and self-worth has probably done more than anything else to achieve the results that my hon. Friend has described.

There is a strain of pessimism that seems to hold that we cannot do anything about some schools and some local education authorities, but that pessimism has been questioned in the past four years. The statistics say it all.

In the past four years, 740 schools have come out of special measures, and 18 local education authorities have been subject to intervention measures.

Although we had headlines for decades about poor LEAs, previous Governments did absolutely nothing about them. If LEAs really are worth something and have an important role to play, it is very important that we move in and take action when they are failing. In the years to come, we shall continue to use those powers to allow schools and LEAs to get on with it when they have shown that they can do so, but intervene when necessary to prevent failure. Nevertheless, for all the improvement and progress that have been made in areas such as that described by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Geraint Davies) where there has been a culture of low expectations, there is still a whole lot more to do.

It is a cruel irony that, at the very point in the development of this nation when education is more important than ever before both for economic prosperity and for social justice, the gap between different sections of our community is still too wide. The gap between the performance of schools in similar circumstances is still too wide. In almost all parts of the education service, the gap between the relative performance of boys and girls and of different ethnic groups is still too wide. The gap in performance between people from different economic backgrounds is still too great.

Although we can celebrate this week's report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development that we have the OECD's highest level of bachelor-level graduations, the fact is that an estimated 7 million adults in the United Kingdom have not got the basics right in reading, writing and arithmetic.

I welcome the expansion in higher education, and acknowledge that some of it happened under the previous Government, but only 17 per cent. of young people from the lower socio-economic groups go on to higher education as opposed to 45 per cent. from the more affluent groups. That is part of the challenge that we face. We will not close the gap unless we invest in education and training. Spending on all sectors in education increased in the previous Parliament and will continue to do so in this one.

As the Prime Minister said yesterday, spending will continue to increase by an average of 5.4 per cent. in real terms over the next three years, meaning that we can build on the investment that we have already made and continue to invest in people and their life chances. It will mean that, by 2004, we will be spending £500 million on sure start, reaching a third of all poor children aged four and under.

We will be able to fund 1.6 million child care places by 2004, and we will have more and better trained teachers and assistants. More child care places have been provided in the past two years than in the previous 20. That is the mark of progress, but the mark of how much more we have to do is that we still cannot satisfy the demand of every parent.

I said that there were 7 million adults without basic skills. Our investment will mean that 750,000 fewer will lack those skills, and we will set a target of 50 per cent. of under-30s going on to higher education by 2010. We will be able to build on our programme for gifted and talented children. We will work with universities and colleges to ensure that we expand that sector, but this time

we will do something about broadening access as well. Expansion alone is not enough. We do not want the figures about the balance of socio-economic backgrounds to remain the same in 2010.

The Queen's Speech makes it clear that our priority in this Parliament will be to deliver on our commitments and make real changes to secondary schools.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): In considering access, will the Secretary of State also take into account cross-departmental issues as well as those that are entirely within her own remit? For example, children with special educational needs have been mentioned. For children with speech and language development problems in north Somerset, it is almost impossible to get a speech therapist. Will she and the Secretary of State for Health set targets so that we can see what progress is being made in recruiting speech therapists for some of our most vulnerable children?

Estelle Morris: I am interested to hear the hon. Gentleman talk about setting targets. In my previous existence on the Front Bench, I often heard the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), argue that targets are a bad thing—but we always welcome a conversion.

I acknowledge that there is a need to work across Departments, and that the question of speech and language therapists is key. Not enough were trained in the past, and there is a real problem of access. It is intolerable if the problem is caused by an argument about who employs them, who funds them, and who is responsible for getting the relevant part of the statement right. Sure start is a good example of cross-departmental working. It has not been easy, but we will continue to make our best endeavours.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): On access, will the Secretary of State give some thought to the effect of the perception of likely student debt, especially on people from poorer backgrounds? The Government-commissioned Callender report, published on Christmas eve, showed clearly that the people most affected by increased debt are those from poorer backgrounds. As the Select Committee also suggested, that could be the cause of the disappointing figures for poorer students going on to higher education. Will she consider the Scottish example, and draw the conclusions that I believe are out there?

Estelle Morris: We have never pretended that this is not a difficult issue. We have acknowledged that if we want an expansion in higher education we must think seriously about how we fund it. Life has changed in those respects. When Lord Dearing considered how we could get the balance right about how much comes from students, how much from families and how much from the nation, it became clear that these were tough decisions. I think that we made the right decision; the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) is not correct to say that the evidence shows that there has been a downturn in people applying to enter higher education. I believe that the figures show that there was a 1.8 per cent. increase in people applying for higher education places last year. We await the results of the review to which he

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referred, but no doubt we shall return to the issue in the coming months. Like him, we shall continue to monitor the evidence.

With reference to particular items in the Queen's Speech, we made it clear that our priority for this Parliament will be secondary schools. May I say as loudly and clearly as possible that we have many fine secondary schools and as many excellent secondary schoolteachers as primary schoolteachers? However, if one looks at the evidence, no one—no teacher, politician or parent—can possibly think that we are good enough or as good as we can be at secondary level. We must look at what is happening at key stage 3 to 11 to 14-year-olds. When tested at the end of year 7, their first year of secondary school, about a third of our students perform less well in the basic subjects than at the end of year 6. Not only have they not made the progress that we expect; they have gone backwards.

Key stage 3 results over the past few years are flat, to say the least. Ofsted comments on the quality of teaching at key stage 3 show that it is not as good as it is for all other age ranges. That cannot be right; we cannot accept that position, and must improve it. It is not a criticism of the profession to say that anybody who teaches years 7, 8 and 9 has not got it right and has failed; it is a fault of the system. Schools and previous Governments have not given enough attention to what happens in the transition from primary to secondary school or what happens in those early years. All the levers that have been applied have been about performing well at key stage 2 and at GCSE level. Too often, years 7, 8 and 9 have been left to coast, and the emphasis in secondary schools has been on year 10 and 11 students. The statistics show that the best predictor of GCSE performance is how students perform at key stage 3. We have got to get that right.

We will do that in partnership; we have to be rigorous and demanding, but we will also be supportive. This September, all our secondary schools will start to extend the literacy and numeracy strategy into the early years of secondary education. The most literate and numerate bunch of 11-year-olds that we have ever had are about to go into secondary schools this September. Not only are they the most literate and numerate 11-year-olds that we have ever had, they are better at science, are more competent in information and communication technology and have confidence in themselves. We cannot let them down or put them into a key stage 3 system that has always allowed children to go backwards, rather than push them forward.

Key stage 3 is therefore important and we shall invest in teachers' professional development so that, over the next few years, all our secondary teachers are up to date in best practice, have learned what works and have learned from their colleagues who are performing at the highest level. That will be funded; teachers will be supported and helped to manage that change. I want to make it clear that the key stage 3 strategy was not dreamed up by me, my colleagues, or civil servants. It was developed by our finest secondary schoolteachers; we are learning from what works best and what has been successful in schools.

Our focus will remain clearly on teaching and learning because they make a difference. To improve them, we must build more levers into the system, which is why we

are embarking on an ambitious agenda to create a diverse school system. All schools need to be good at the basics and teach the national curriculum well. However, they need to do more than that; they must be good at the basics and good at something special. We already have the beginnings of a diversity agenda in our school system. We have specialist schools, beacon schools, training schools, church schools and schools with a generous spirit that are supporting schools in other parts of the local education authority. Today, we announced a further 79 specialist schools and a further 425 beacon schools, exceeding the target that we set ourselves. Let us be absolutely straight that on offer will not be a two-tier system, but a guarantee to every parent and child that our schools are well funded, teach the national curriculum and are good at the basics. Every parent knows from visits to secondary schools that much is the same in every school—they all teach the national curriculum and go through the same testing regime, and they even look vaguely similar—but that something is different about every one. There is something special about every single secondary school in this country. We intend to allow schools to build on that specialness and to allow ourselves, as a nation, to celebrate that diversity and to install the levers for school improvement.

Adam Price (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): The Secretary of State referred in her comments to this country and this nation. It might aid my understanding as a new Member if she clarified exactly which nation she means. When she introduces any new provisions for education in England and Wales, will she undertake to respect the judgment of the Labour Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning in the National Assembly for Wales that specialist schools are neither attractive nor practical in terms of Welsh educational need or values?

Estelle Morris: The hon. Gentleman knows full well where my responsibilities lie. Devolving power means that nations make their choices and exercise their preferences about how they guide their systems, and I have regular contact with my colleague and shall continue to do so. We exchange ideas, but she will develop her own system. Our White Paper will also refer to that issue.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her new post, which is a well deserved promotion. She smiled when she said that the new system would not be a two-tier one, because she knows full well that there is a two-tier system. Some 40 per cent. of schools will be specialist schools and they will get £500,000 more over four years, so it is a two-tier system in terms of funding. The extra 100 faith schools will also be able to select on the basis of faith. Increasingly, under this Government, we see not diversity, but schools being able to choose students. What will the Secretary of State do for the 60 per cent. of schools classified as "bog standard" and will she distance herself from that awful comment? How will she ensure that those schools that are not beacon schools, church schools or specialist schools will not be disadvantaged by receiving fewer resources to meet the aspirations of their children?

Estelle Morris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words of congratulation. Sameness is not what parents want, and sameness does not raise standards. Schools have their

own characters and missions—they are not all the same, as I have said—and we want a secondary school system that allows schools to build on those differences. Our aspirations do not stop at 40 per cent. of our secondary schools being specialist schools. We are into transformation and radical change, and that will take time.

The hon. Gentleman will agree that when we came into power in 1997 the specialist school movement was an exclusive club. The progress that we have made has meant that some of the schools in our inner cities that serve the most disadvantaged areas—such as Golden Hillock school near my constituency in Birmingham—have received specialist school status, and they would not have come anywhere near it under the Conservative Government. I have every aspiration for schools to reach that standard, and he should listen to us when we say that that is our target. In the medium and long term we want to be able to respond to every school that wants to be a specialist school and is ready to take on that role. That is the message. We want diversity for every school—not diversity for a few or rationed diversity—to enable them to play to their strengths.

The diversity in schools that I do not like is that between the good and the bad, which has caused us difficulty for generation after generation. Although we have a record of success in turning failing schools around, some schools still have not made it. Some schools, often in neighbourhoods where no child has ever gone to university and nothing more has been expected from the school than what it has been able to give historically, have not made it, and we must conquer that problem. We have tried a number of methods over the past four years, with considerable success, but we have not yet got it completely right. I promise the House, parents and schools that we will not turn our back on a school where underachievement is almost institutionalised. We will work with it to ensure improvement, but we need to find more ways to achieve that.

That is why the Queen's Speech made it clear, as will the Bill that eventually comes before Parliament, that we want to make partnerships with the voluntary and private sectors to find innovative ways to turn around failing schools. Our diverse school system contains a group of schools at the cutting edge that do very well and are the innovators for the next generation of school improvement. I want to free them up to be innovators, and they too may want to seek relationships and partnerships with the private and voluntary sectors. I want them to be able to do so.

This is not about privatisation. As has been the case with local education authorities, we will be rigorous when it comes to spending public sector money on contracts with the private sector. There is no question of money being handed over with no targets being set, and without accountability, measurement or a clear vision of where that money will go. The Queen's Speech makes it clear that the challenge of education in the public service is so important, and so much to be cherished, that we are not prepared to forbid the use of private sector expertise where that may be of help. The aim is to find ways in which the private and voluntary sectors can support the better delivery of public service.

I have no doubt about the responsibility that we have with regard to those who use and work in the public service. We have the highest of aspirations. We know that it will not be easy over the next few years. We have a good education service, but it could be better.

As Secretary of State, I am lucky to work with the finest generation of teachers that any Secretary of State has had the privilege to work with. Our pledge to teachers is that we will offer true partnership when it comes to raising standards. Our pledge to parents and pupils is that we will not rest until our education service is the best in the world. It must offer pupils the opportunity to aspire and succeed, and it must be able to realise the dreams and aspirations of all parents and students. That is what they want, and what we want. That is what we will deliver.

2.8 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I congratulate the Secretary of State on her appointment and welcome her to her new, more senior position in the Department. I was also going to congratulate the Minister for Universities on her promotion, but I see that she has just left the Chamber. However, I should like to welcome the other members of the Department's team. The Minister for Schools is a former Treasury Minister, so I am sure that he will be able to give us new insights into how to get around the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I also welcome to the departmental team the hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis), and am pleased to welcome back to the education arena the hon. Member for Wentworth (John Healey), with whom I served on the Select Committee on Education and Employment.

I am pleased to start by noting two points of agreement with the Secretary of State: I agree that the quality of public services affects the quality of people's lives, and I am also happy to join her in paying tribute to those who work tirelessly to deliver good public services to users. However, she does not need me to tell her that she comes to her job with a full in-tray. There is much to be done to improve the education system in this country if, as she proposes, it is to be the best in the world. There is also much to be done to put right the problems caused by the Labour Government's first term in office.

The clear message from the general election for all politicians is that we must address the everyday problems that people—both workers and users—identify in the public services. Sadly missing from the Gracious Speech and from the opening speech made by the Secretary of State today is any sign that the Government really understand the problems faced by people working in the public services, and especially by those working in education and the health service. It is those problems that affect the quality of service provided. If the Government believe that they can reform public services without solving the problems faced by those working in the public services, they are gravely mistaken. We desperately need to raise the morale of the teaching profession and of health service professionals and give them greater scope to use their skills and professionalism in the interests of pupils and patients. We have a real crisis of teacher shortages and problems of shortages of nurses and doctors.

In education there are real problems involving rising secondary class sizes. I listened with interest to the Secretary of State's comments on class sizes. She omitted to mention that secondary class sizes are now at their

[Mrs. Theresa May]

highest level for more than 20 years, that we have more than 100,000 more children in secondary schools in classes of more than 30 than we had four years ago, and that we have more than 5,000 more children in nursery classes of more than 30 than four years ago. There is also chaos in our post-16 exam system, yet none of those problems is addressed in the Government's programme.

We have been promised more structural reform in health and education. In education we have been promised more sponsorship of schools, which has been interpreted as more private sector involvement, and more freedom for successful schools. If that means a damascene conversion of the Labour party to the cause of setting schools free, letting teachers teach and allowing the private sector to run schools that are funded by the taxpayer, I welcome it.

I certainly welcome the Government's conversion to the policy that all schools should be able to establish their own ethos and distinctive educational offer for local children. Over the past four years, I have heard the Government talk about restricting specialist schools and the ability of schools to have the freedom to set their own ethos, so I welcome their sudden conversion to offering that to all schools.

Anyone who talks to teachers can be in no doubt about the burden of their work load, the problems of red tape and their disillusionment. Anyone who speaks to heads can be in no doubt that they want more money without strings attached. If the Government intend to give schools genuine freedom, I welcome it. We on these Benches may be forgiven a certain sense of *deja vu*. Four years ago the Labour Government told us that the private sector would be able to run schools, but they failed to deliver. Four years ago they told us that they would cut bureaucracy in schools and let teachers get on with their job, but they failed to deliver. The same Government who tell us today that they will give more freedom to successful schools, three years ago abolished that freedom when they abolished grant-maintained status. Their conversion today will come as little comfort to schools that have seen budgets cut, courses closed and staff made redundant as a result of that abolition. Nevertheless, I repeat that I hope that schools will get genuine freedom.

I also hope that the Secretary of State's appointment will mean a move away from eye-catching headlines, initiatives, spin and gimmickry, although the first signs are not promising. Yesterday morning we heard in the Gracious Speech that reform of education would

"promote diversity . . . provide new opportunities for school sponsorship . . . and greater freedom for successful headteachers and governors."

That was spun to the press as greater private sector involvement in schools—the private sector being brought in to run schools. Yet barely had we returned from another place when we saw in the Department's press release, explaining that the education Bill was being published, that promoting diversity meant city academies, more faith schools and introducing advanced specialist schools—the very same advanced specialist schools to which the Government referred in their Green Paper last February. We are told that these schools could volunteer to take on a number of innovative ideas from a menu developed centrally—so much for freedom and diversity.

Far from the private sector coming in to run schools, it will be able, we are told, to introduce fixed-term standards contracts to enable private organisations and others to

support the management of schools. In other words, the private sector can help out so long as it helps out as the Government prescribe. Who, I wonder, will determine the nature of the standards contracts?

If the Government are serious about genuine freedom for schools, they need to take a leap of faith. They must trust teachers again in the provision of the curriculum, get more money direct to schools and start trusting heads and teachers to make the right funding decisions for their schools. They must accept that heads and teachers must be allowed to enforce discipline, free from constraints from central Government. Will the Government show their faith in heads by removing the fines imposed on schools for excluding pupils? Will they ensure that the authority of head teachers is not undermined by local education authorities overturning decisions on exclusions on appeal? Will the Government show faith with heads and teachers by accepting that schools need to be set free from the burden of central Government bureaucracy?

The Secretary of State can make no better start in her office than by tearing up vast numbers of directives and circulars that will otherwise be issued by her Department to schools and teachers. So far we have seen little sign of that. I hope that over the next few weeks she will be willing to take that leap of faith, and trust heads and teachers. Certainly, all schools must be given the opportunity to manage their own affairs and develop their distinctive ethos. Will she show faith in heads and teachers by offering the new freedoms of which she speaks to all schools, not just to a chosen few flagship examples?

Will the new legislation include measures to amend the law to give private companies the ability to incentivise staff, as in other sectors and as called for by David Hart of the National Association of Head Teachers and by the chairman and chief executive of Nord Anglia Education? Will the Government enable private companies to make a profit out of their involvement in schools? The answers to those questions will show the extent to which the Government are serious about providing genuine private sector involvement in and genuine freedom for schools.

Mr. Willis: Clearly, Tory party policy is to move towards private sector involvement in the delivery of front-line services in schools. Will the hon. Lady explain how a company such as Nord Anglia, which is a for-profit company, actually makes a profit from that? Where does the profit come from, if not from employing fewer or different teachers, as 80 per cent. of a school's budget is spent on the personnel who deliver the programmes of study?

Mrs. May: The hon. Gentleman has omitted to notice that the policy of bringing the private sector into schools is now Government policy. I am saying that I support that policy, but I want to know whether the Secretary of State is genuinely willing to do that and to give freedom to schools.

What matters to parents and pupils is the quality of education that children receive. What matters to them is getting an education that can fulfil the needs and develop the full potential of every individual child. That is why I

want freedom for schools. That is why I want schools to be able to use whatever services are necessary to ensure that they can provide that quality of education.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs. May: I will make a little more freedom—*[Laughter.]* I mean, progress. That shows I genuinely believe in freedom.

We will support freedom for schools, but we will not hesitate to point out where the Government circumscribe that freedom by red tape and bureaucracy.

Two weeks ago the electorate gave Labour the benefit of the doubt—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State may laugh but she knows that she will be judged not on her rhetoric, but on whether she delivers. She needs not only to deliver on her proposals in the Gracious Speech, but to resolve the serious problems facing education that were not referred to in the Government's programme.

The single biggest challenge facing the Government is the crisis in the teaching profession as seen in teacher recruitment and retention. The Government claim to have increased the number of teachers by 11,000 over the past four years, yet that figure includes unqualified teachers and some supply staff. The Government now have a target of recruiting 10,000 extra teachers by 2006. What does that figure mean? I hope that Ministers will today explain whether that means 10,000 more than the total number today, 10,000 more than current targets, a net gain of 10,000 more teachers or just increasing the numbers coming in without doing anything to stem the flow of teachers from the profession in droves.

The Government are a Government of targets, yet they refuse to set a target for reducing the number of teacher vacancies. That would show their commitment to solving the problems facing our schools, but perhaps their refusal is not surprising.

Estelle Morris: The way we count teachers and arrive at the conclusion that there are 11,000 more than in 1997 is exactly the way in which the previous Government did the teacher count—nothing has changed. We all have a responsibility for the message that we send about the work of the profession. Opposition parties that say that there has not been an increase in the number of teachers in the classroom let down teachers and parents.

Will the hon. Lady comment on her target for increasing teacher recruitment? The Conservative party made it clear that it would not devote one penny to that, so we can be thankful that we have the resources. There will be 10,000 more teachers. Will she also acknowledge that the number of people leaving the profession is not sky high, as she said, and that the net gain over the past four years is indeed 11,000?

Mrs. May: The only people who are letting down parents, pupils and teachers are the Government, who consistently refuse to accept the extent of the crisis in teacher shortages. During the general election campaign, at the conference of the National Association of Head Teachers, I heard the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), the Chairman of the Select Committee, tell head teachers that there was no problem of teacher shortages and no crisis. He received the expected reaction from head teachers, who would not believe him because

they knew the reality. Once again, the Government are setting their face against the reality of what is happening in our schools.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): The hon. Lady had selective hearing that day, as she obviously has today. I have a witness sitting on the Liberal Benches who will attest to this. I acknowledged that there were problems, but I do not accept her constant theme of crisis, crisis, crisis. That is not true, and that is the case that I made.

Mrs. May: There is a crisis, as is evident from *The Times Educational Supplement*, which advertises 9,000 jobs in a week. The sum of £7 million has been taken out of our schools' expenditure, and head teachers must search desperately to find teachers to fill their vacancies. It is time that the Government accepted that there is a crisis in schools, and realised that the bureaucracy and red tape that they have loaded on to teachers over the past four years is causing teachers to leave the profession. That is happening in other public services as well. People cannot deliver the quality of public service that they want to deliver to pupils, patients and others who use our public services.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. May: I must make some progress. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman.

Perhaps the Government's reluctance to face the issue of teacher vacancies is not surprising, given that *The Times Educational Supplement* and the Secondary Heads Association estimate that the current number of vacancies in secondary schools alone is 10,000. The National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers estimates that there are some 30,000 vacancies in total. Against that background, a policy of recruiting an extra 10,000 teachers, be they full-time equivalents or not, over five years will make no real difference.

While the Government, during the election campaign, were denying that there was a crisis in teacher vacancies, Anwell Jones, the deputy head teacher of Ashford high school in Surrey, was warning:

"The quality of supply staff is so uneven that it has an effect on pupil behaviour. It might be better to give them four good days and send them home for one day, rather than a full diet that proves counter-productive."

One of the first priorities of the Secretary of State must surely be to ensure that standards in our schools do not suffer as a result of the crisis of teacher vacancies, yet there is nothing in the Gracious Speech to address the issue; nor is there any sign of the urgent action that needs to be taken to restore the morale of the teaching profession.

We await the findings of the study commissioned by the Government into teachers' work load, but that has kicked the problem into the long grass, and action is needed today. Notwithstanding the findings of that report, the Government must quickly find a way to ensure that teachers are trusted again, feel valued and receive the support that they need from Government, not constant interference. That is today's problem, which needs action

[Mrs. May]

now. All the Secretary of State's promised reforms will be worthless if there are not enough teachers to put them into practice.

The House will be aware that, as has been pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), there has been a major problem with the new AS-level system. It is clearly important that students are provided with a breadth of studies. The Secretary of State mentioned the need for a breadth of curriculum, but what is worrying about the AS system, combined with requirements for key skills, is not only the work load that it imposes on students, but the way in which other activities, such as sports, voluntary work and the arts, are being crowded out.

At a time when young people should be given opportunities to develop not just study skills in individual subjects but wider interests and involvements, there is simply no time. In the *Daily Telegraph* yesterday there was a report on AS-levels.

Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North): This will be authoritative.

Mrs. May: We hear laughter from those on the Labour Benches, but I shall quote students and teachers. I know that the Government have difficulty with that, but they are people who have been through the AS-level experience and speak about its impact. For example, Amy Jackson, a 17-year-old who has just finished sitting the old-style A-levels, said:

"This year, the lower sixth has had no time to look beyond a limited syllabus. The choir is working at less than half strength, the plays have been noticeably under-rehearsed, sports fixtures have been dramatically scaled down, and the school newspaper has been suspended because the editorial staff are all sitting exams."

Far from broadening the experience of those young people, their experience has been narrowed.

The deputy head of Mill Hill, Julian Johnson-Mundy, said:

"There's time only to spoon feed as much as we can into the pupils before the exams. Breadth of approach has disappeared. What's left is a narrower and weaker academic syllabus and a poorer extra-curricular programme."

The principal of Cardiff Academy spoke of the reason for these problems:

"lack of planning, lack of consultation, speed of implementation and an over-prescriptive syllabus."

The consequence is

"children taught at top speed in larger classes for a shorter period than ever before."

We welcome the fact that the Government have set up a review to examine what has happened. Although change needs to be carefully thought through and introduced to prevent further problems, it is clear that action needs to be taken to resolve problems before next year. However, we need a wider debate. We need to ask whether the new AS exams were exams too far. Has not the time come for a national debate on our qualifications system post-16? We owe it to our young people to get that right. Mere tinkering at the edges risks further change and further problems down the road.

Much focus has been placed on schools, and the Secretary of State noted that the Government's programme is focused entirely on secondary schools. However, another

part of our education system has been experiencing difficulties. The further education sector finds that it is losing lecturers to secondary schools. There is an industrial dispute in further education and all too often, in looking at the problems in FE, the Government forget that as many as 50 per cent. of FE colleges' staff may be support staff, not lecturers. Those are the immediate issues facing the Secretary of State, but they are not addressed in the Gracious Speech. We want action on those problems, not just on the structural reforms that the Government mention in their legislative programme.

The Government will be judged on whether they take action on such problems, not on whether they can introduce another education Bill in the House of Commons. We want an education system that delivers the type of schools that parents want for their children—schools where teachers can spend more time working with the children to make sure that they are properly motivated and get the best education possible, schools that give children a start in life that equips them to go on and realise their ambition and full potential, and schools with a sense of discipline where pupils can get on and learn without disruption from other pupils and where teachers are teachers, not policemen.

Mr. Rendel: The hon. Lady has said repeatedly that she wants to free up schools. What would she say to the head teacher of a small rural primary school in my constituency, who called me in during the election and said that teachers and head teachers were already doing far too much administration, and that she was worried about the possibility of a new Conservative Government because in her view freeing up schools would mean that more administration was passed from the local authority to the teachers and head teachers?

Mrs. May: I am grateful to that head teacher for her confidence in the election turning out somewhat differently than it did. She was identifying the strain that she was already feeling as a result of the bureaucracy imposed by this Labour Government.

This Labour Government will be judged over the next four or five years on whether they free up teachers to get on with the job of teaching and remove administrative burdens from head teachers—whether they give head teachers the freedom to make the decisions that they want to make for their schools and do not tie them up in red tape, circumscribing them constantly by telling them what to do and interfering. This Labour Government will be judged on whether, at the end of this Parliament, schools face fewer than 58 funding streams. All those different streams have different rules and are differently administered—taking up more time and resources just to get money from the Government.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. May: No, I will not give way any further.

The Government are doing nothing about the problem of bureaucracy and red tape facing head teachers today. The Government have been told for four years that they should be doing something about it, but they have failed to deliver. We have seen no evidence today or in the Gracious Speech that the Government have learned from

teachers and head teachers about the problems that they face and are willing to address those problems. It is on whether they deliver on those problems and not simply deliver yet another education Bill that the Government will be judged.

We want quality of standards, choice and discipline to be the objective of the Government's reform programme. I seek an assurance from the Secretary of State that the detail of her programme is as ambitious and far-reaching as we expect and the children of this country deserve. We now need to raise aspirations in too many schools, and one does not do so by burdening schools with red tape and constant Government interference; one does so by setting schools free, letting teachers get on with their jobs, widening diversity and increasing parental choice. We shall support measures that achieve such ends, but we will give the Government no quarter if their reforms do not live up to the expectations and ambitions of parents, pupils, heads and teachers.

The Government were given the benefit of the doubt at the election, but they will soon find that they have run out of excuses for failing to deliver. There is no more time for spin, gimmicks or initiative overload; now is the time for action.

2.32 pm

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): I welcome my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Estelle Morris) to her post as the Secretary of State for Education and Skills. There could be no better exponent of our education policies than her, and I am delighted that she is where she is.

The hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) would not want to accept advice from me, but if one has recently failed an examination—the Conservative party failed the exam badly—it is better to look at what one has got wrong rather than try to lecture those who have passed the examination on what they got wrong. We must have done something right to be returned with such a thumping great majority for the second time. I am delighted at that.

I have waited for many years—the recent general election was my sixth—for the Labour party to be returned for a second full term in government. It was vital that we achieved that, and it is vital that we deliver. In the past I have seen our party make the mistake of trying to solve all public sector and other problems quickly, and then lose because it has not struck the right balance in the economy. I am pleased to say that the roles of the Labour and Conservative parties seem to have been reversed and that it is now the Conservative party that is making such mistakes, which I welcome. It is vital that we get things right in this Parliament, just as it was in the previous one.

Three delightful incidents during the election campaign stand out in my mind. One was when I walked across an estate where many youngsters had been unemployed and a couple of young black kids gave me the thumbs up. I asked them what the Labour Government had done for them and they replied without any prompting, "It's that welfare to work; we've got jobs now and they're permanent." That made me feel good.

The second incident involved a pensioner who had previously received about £65 a week in income support—about 500,000 pensioners did not receive any pension at all because for one reason or other they had not paid into systems—but who now receives £92 a week.

Again, I felt positive. The third incident was of a woman saying to me that she had benefited not only from the welfare to work scheme but from the working families tax credit, and that that had made her more than £20 a week better off. That is why I am in politics, why I was so pleased that we won a second term and why I have no problem saying that we delivered during our first term.

We still have a lot more to do. For the best part of a century, this country has under-invested in its public services, for which we have paid an awful price. That is why I find it difficult to take all the Conservative party's criticisms of public services. Everything that it did during the 18 years in which I sat in opposition was designed not only to undermine the morale and confidence of the public sector but to cut investment in it.

There are a number of areas in which delivery will take a long time. The most notable one is probably transport. It will be extremely difficult to get transport right quickly. The recent high-speed rail link between Calais and Marseilles took the French 12 years to build. When one thinks that we have not even delivered a high-speed rail link to the channel tunnel yet, one realises how much further we must go before we can compare our public services with the more advanced services in many other European nations.

Similarly, I have no doubt that we have much further to go in the national health service, because that is about not just money but management. That brings me to the first of the problem areas of delivery about which I want to speak. I have no problem with bringing in the private sector—subject to certain conditions. It can be very useful in a range of public services. We should not approach the matter from the position that public is good and private is bad, or private is good and public is bad. We should simply ask which can deliver best and in what way. At the end of the day, it is the quality of services received by the people whom we represent that matters. That is what we are after improving.

There was one particularly important matter that we did not get quite right in the previous Parliament, and I am pleased that it is clearly in our manifesto this time. To deliver good public services, we need a well-paid work force whose morale is good. I emphasise that the work force comprises not only teachers, doctors and nurses but employees throughout the public sector.

Trade unionists and other public sector workers fear that private sector involvement will in some way lower standards of employment contracts, particularly salaries, hours, holidays, safeguards and so on, and that therefore they will lose out. That has happened in the past. Indeed, it was a major failing of the Conservative party when it was in government. It simply used privatisation or the introduction of private services to undercut the work force. It is not surprising, therefore, that the public sector work force was demoralised and run down over many years.

We must turn that around. That must be a priority for us, whether in the public or the private sectors, for employees at all levels in the health service, education, transport or housing. There is much room for improvement in housing, such as in the willingness of tenants to transfer to housing associations or other companies. All that must be predicated on an improved outcome for those who receive the service and a proper standard of employment and payment for the work force.

[Mr. Clive Soley]

That brings me to the second area that I want to mention, which is by far the biggest problem facing us in the public sector: the long-term problem of the work of local government.

I think that all Labour Members—and, I hope, other hon. Members—realise the importance not only of the structure of local government but of councillors. We would do well to keep in mind one of the lessons that I learned in the 1980s when the Conservative party began to lose its councillors in droves. I remember that a group of about 18 Conservative councillors in west Oxfordshire stood down because of the then Government's policies on local authorities. That is an awful warning with regard to ensuring that our councillors have the ability to do the job and deliver the services that they want to provide for their people. Above all, recognition must be given to the jobs that they do and they must have a structure that enables them to provide funding themselves and to answer to the electorate.

Significant issues are involved in giving local councils more control, with the acceptance that that involves the responsibility to answer for the use of the money. If we get that right, we can revitalise local government in this country. Local government has always been one of the bedrocks of our democracy. Indeed, it was local government that led the industrial and public sector revolutions in the 19th century. It was local council members and mayors in cities who delivered the structure that made the industrial revolution work and that improved cleanliness, public health and a range of other concerns. We must return to that basis. I have long been a convert to the idea of regional government, on which I want us to proceed as fast as possible, but I also want us to revitalise and improve local government by giving more powers to local councillors and ensuring that they have the ability to raise the funding that is necessary for them to deliver.

I can think of few better examples of where we have still not got that right than housing benefit. When the Conservatives introduced the housing benefit system, it seemed almost designed to fail. I acknowledge, however, that it is also incredibly difficult to reform. If the housing benefit system throughout the country were to undergo a reform that worked in London, it would cost an arm and a leg. On the other hand, if a system were introduced in London that was predicated on what was done elsewhere, nobody would be able to afford to live in London. We have enough problems already in the London area in respect of lack of affordable housing, whether it be for teachers, nurses or other essential workers. I acknowledge that those difficulties are enormous in terms of the reform of local government, local government finance and housing benefit, but I point out that the way in which they knit together is profoundly important for the future of this country.

I should like to say a quick word about crime, as I have always felt that we still need to do more to support victims. I am thinking not so much about money as about the support that we give the victims of violence. I could not help but notice, as I think all of us have, the dreadful agony suffered by the Bulger family and how they coped with it. In a recent case in Norway, the family dealt with their experience very differently and did not have the same desire for vengeance. When one considers the way

in which the family were treated, one appreciates that they were dealt with much more sympathetically and were given much more help.

As is fairly typical of the treatment of the families of victims of extreme violence in this country, the Bulger family were given little help in coping with their feelings. How on earth a person ever would cope with such feelings is beyond me, but practice in other European countries is ahead of what happens here. For example, I do not think that, in those countries, there would be any of the dreadful newspaper-driven attempts that have been made to expose the two children who committed the murder in the belief that pursuing them throughout their lives will improve the quality of life for them, society or the Bulger family. More help for victims, other than of a financial type, would be very useful.

I was delighted to hear my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary speak about the need to deal with the asylum issue, partly by recognising that the core of the problem is that this country does not have a proper immigration policy. One of the reasons why the problem has been so difficult to deal with is that, as we know in areas such as mine, many people who claim asylum are immigrants who wanted to emigrate to Britain for work. In a part of Ealing that is situated in my constituency, it is almost impossible to argue otherwise, as about the third biggest group of asylum seekers is from Poland. It is difficult to argue that people from that country are fleeing in fear of their lives; they migrate to get work. The problem is that we do not have a proper immigration system that would enable us to separate the people who are fleeing extreme violence and to give them the help and support that they need. I hope that we can make progress on that.

I do not wish to delay the House much longer. I know that it is not the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills to ensure that a foxhunting Bill is reintroduced, for which she is probably grateful, but we must ensure that that happens. It is a matter of trust. As long as there is a free vote on the various options in such a Bill, people will be satisfied, but it would be a serious mistake not to introduce a similar Bill to that which was considered before the election.

Finally, I want to speak about the reform of Parliament. I listened with great care to the comments made yesterday by the Leader of the Opposition. For the first time, I heard him make some very positive remarks. He will not be in his job for very much longer, but if those remarks were a genuine reflection of Tory party thinking, they are very welcome. We introduced a lot of reforms in the previous Parliament under my right hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Ann Taylor), who is sitting to my left, and her successor, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. One of the biggest changes was the attempt to programme legislation so that it could receive proper, in-depth and detailed consideration, instead of being the subject of time-wasting speeches. The reform fell down largely, but not entirely, because the Opposition wanted to use programme motion debating time as another way of wasting time and keeping us here late into the night. That will stop in the next week or two because of the way in which we will address these issues in the near future.

The Leader of the Opposition spoke yesterday about the need to reform Parliament. Let me make an appeal to the Conservative party: ultimately, all major parties go into opposition and into government, and it is in nobody's

interests to work in a system in which we score points off each other but do not give legislation the detailed examination that it deserves. One of the factors that produced voter apathy in the election was the feeling that the House had not reformed itself enough. That was not the biggest factor, but it was important. As we often call for other reforms of the public sector, we should sometimes pay a little more attention to ourselves. That is why I believe that we must take the matter forward.

David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): The hon. Gentleman said that we should not try to score points off each other, but I should like to give a single example in relation to which his remarks about the guillotine or timetable system being driven by timewasting are incorrect. During consideration of the Bill that became the Football (Disorder) Act 2000, a serious human rights issue arose: the circumstances in which passports should be taken away on the basis of suspicion. Timetabling meant that it was impossible to amend the Bill in that crucial respect. Many of the hon. Members who were present, including a former Attorney-General, wanted to introduce a constructive amendment, but it was impossible for them to do so. The way in which timetabling is currently run prevents the House from exercising its proper right and duty as a defender of civil liberties.

Mr. Soley: I am not arguing that we got everything right. The circumstances that the right hon. Gentleman describes arose partly because of other things that had been happening at about that time. I say to him that we attempted to allow control of time by the Opposition and Back Benchers in general. I acknowledge that we have not yet got that right, but that is what can be achieved. It will happen only if the Opposition are fully involved. The *quid pro quo* for the Government getting their legislation on time—that has always been achieved through use of the guillotine, whether by the previous or current Governments—is that Opposition parties and Back Benchers have control of the timing of debates and can prevent Governments from kicking the difficult bits into the early hours of the morning, or whatever else.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): The hon. Gentleman suggests that we have not had enough modernisation. Have not there been four years of modernisation followed by a very low turnout in a general election? How does he explain the fact that 20 years ago, when by present standards the House was thoroughly unmodernised and had all-night sittings and all the features that he has described, voter turnouts in general elections and, arguably, interest in politics and this place were much higher?

Mr. Soley: I could give the hon. Gentleman a range of answers. I have said for some years that the House was most successful in the 19th century and early 20th century. After that, it did not change. We did not change the constitution or the practices of the House. For many reasons, those practices became increasingly out of kilter with normal thinking and behaviour. If he believes that the public like the idea of his sitting up all night debating nothing in particular when most legislation is passed without scrutiny, he is not listening to them. I am considering not other aspects of hon. Members' work, but our effectiveness in examining Bills.

If we are to improve our effectiveness, we must do much more to modernise. There is an opportunity for the parties to come together. If the Government got anything wrong about the modernisation process, it was our attempt to work with other parties and get them on board. The phrase "got wrong" is perhaps inappropriate, because we should not have done otherwise. However, the process was consequently much slower than I would have liked and some aspects did not work. If Conservative Members will not come on board, we must modernise the House without their co-operation. That is undesirable.

We can consider a range of issues together, such as the operation of Select Committees and the Chamber. We could produce many more draft Bills. The media also have a role to play. The draft Bill procedure was described in *The Guardian* yesterday as a way of putting matters on hold, whereas it is an opportunity for people inside and outside the House, and those who are affected by legislation, to consider and comment on it in draft so that it can be put into better shape.

A range of achievements is possible, but the House must have the will to make them. It is not a matter for us, but the House of Lords desperately needs to reform itself. We can help to reform the way in which people reach the other place, but one or two incidents that people witnessed there yesterday may make them wish to reconsider structures in the House of Lords.

On several occasions, I have said that we need to reconsider the oath. There are many republicans here. I remember the late Willie Hamilton, who swore allegiance to the Queen but then denounced her and all her works. An oath to Parliament and democracy might be a better way forward. Hon. Members would be free to take the oath to the Queen and Parliament if they wished.

David Davis: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for intervening on him twice. There is a genuine problem at the core of the timetabling system. The hon. Gentleman talks about the involvement of Opposition Front Benchers and Back Benchers in the process, but timetabling is a deal between Front Benchers. Independent Back Benchers are often the strongest defenders of liberties in the House. They do not have sufficient influence over decisions about crucial individual clauses that they want to debate at length.

Mr. Soley: I do not believe that we have got everything right. There is room for movement and we have to reconsider some matters. However, everyone loses patience with the approach of, "Let's keep discussing the programme motion for another three quarters of an hour because we can do that" for the fun of it. If that is the name of the game, we must simply plough ahead with modernisation.

I have spoken primarily about public services. It would be easier to convince the public of the need to reform public services if we reformed ourselves.

2.54 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I congratulate the Secretary of State for Education and Skills on a well deserved promotion. Plenty of such elevations are neither promotions nor well deserved, but that is not true of her. I also congratulate the Minister of State, Department of Health on her well deserved promotion.

[Dr. Evan Harris]

Both Ministers are in important "delivery" Departments, and I expect that they may find the Parliament hard going. Again, the Government will be unable to meet the electorate's expectations. They will find themselves defending the indefensible, supporting the unsupportable and trying to justify the unjustifiable. Some contributions from Labour Members today have displayed a little of that.

I want to focus on four main themes. First, I want to examine the evidence on which Government policy on public services will or will not be based. Secondly, I want to consider whether the policies are planned or haphazard. Do they constitute arrival at a destination by a series of initiatives and gimmicks rather than by a clear plan? Thirdly, I wish to discuss whether the Government's approach is honest from the outset, not only towards the electorate and the staff who work in the public services, but towards Labour Back Benchers, who will ask questions about the Government's direction. Staff, the electorate and hon. Members—even Labour Members—deserve an honest account of their aims. Fourthly, I want to examine whether their proposed policies are well considered in the wider context of society.

I shall not detain the House for too long on those themes because many hon. Members wish to speak, including new Members. I hope that my hon. Friends the Members for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes) and for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke) will catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker. They bring a wealth of experience to the Liberal Democrat Benches and to the House.

On the issue of evidence, what evaluation have the Government made of the virtues of more private sector involvement in public services? What academic evaluations can the Government cite to show that the private finance initiative in the health service has been a success in providing value for money and in achieving their objectives? Such academic work has been undertaken in a series of articles in the *British Medical Journal* by the professor of public policy and her department at the university of London. She presents clear evidence and conclusions to show that the Government's implementation of the private finance initiative has been and will be a disaster. Instead of commissioning or citing more research, the Government have responded by attacking the researchers' credentials.

Perhaps *Private Eye* is the Government's journal of record since they do not respect the *British Medical Journal*. *Private Eye* states that, when the Secretary of State for Health appeared on "Channel Four News" during the election campaign, and

"Jon Snow dared to suggest that building hospitals and schools by PFI was 'mortgaging our children's future', Milburn exploded in fury, denouncing Snow for accepting at face value the view of 'third-rate, leftish academics'."

I suspect that all three of those words were meant as an insult. Instead of trying to abuse and denigrate researchers, the Government should commission or cite research that shows that PFI works.

The Government should take account of good, peer-reviewed research papers. Their idea of peer review is getting Lord Falconer and Baroness Jay to cast their eye over a press release.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there was a gap in the speech of the Secretary of State for Education and Skills? She did not explain what the private sector would get out of PFI or privatised health and education services. At least Conservative Front-Bench Members are plain about the matter; their answer is profit. What is the advantage of the Government's policies to the private sector? Is not it also profit from the public purse?

Dr. Harris: The Government must not only show evidence that the proposal can work, but explain clearly what the price will be. If it means public sector funds going to shareholders in well padded companies, or another Railtrack—this time for the NHS—the Government should make it clear that that is the case or explain what lessons are going to be learned from previous privatisations. I fear that those lessons will not have been learned.

In higher education, there is good evidence of the effect of the Government's policies.

Dr. Fox rose—

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West)
rose—

Dr. Harris: I shall give way in a moment.

The then Department for Education and Employment funded South Bank university to carry out research into higher education, which found that

"most full-time students, however, did think that their friends might have decided against university because of the changes in student funding and finances. 61 per cent. of full-time students agreed with the statement that 'Changes to student funding have deterred some of my friends from coming to university'. The proportion of students agreeing with the statement was highest among students from social classes IV and V . . . black students . . . and women aged 25"—

who are—

"the very focus of widening participation strategies."

There has not yet been a Government response to their own commissioned research in that area.

The then Select Committee on Education and Employment, with its majority of able but loyal Labour Back Benchers, joined in, too. It stated:

"We recommend that the Government should tackle the consequences of student poverty for retention by improving access to financial support for less well-off students, raising very substantially the income threshold at which graduates have to begin repayment and addressing concerns about debt escalation."

Nothing in the Government response sought to tackle those concerns. We have academic evidence and a review from a Select Committee, but the Government still do nothing.

Dr. Fox: May I take the hon. Gentleman back to private finance initiatives? Is it not simplistic either to reject PFI out of hand or to pretend that PFI is in itself a generic solution? Surely the success or otherwise of any PFI project will be determined by the quality of the contract that has been negotiated. Is not the real worry over recent PFI contracts, particularly in the health service, the rate of return being given to get projects off the ground quickly to suit political timetables?

Dr. Harris: If one accepts PFI, clearly the quality of the contract will be important. The Deputy Prime Minister

was asked about that on Radio 4 yesterday and I have to say that, even having read the transcript, I do not know what he was trying to say. Even with a translation it was unclear.

I remember that, during the passage of the National Health Service (Private Finance) Act 1997, there was huge competition between the new Labour Front Bench and the then Conservative Front Bench as to who had invented the idea of PFI, amid claims that whoever had done so must be right. If the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) considers those debates, he will regret the enthusiasm with which his party, as well as the Government, decided that PFI was the only way.

David Davis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Harris: No, I want to make progress on schools. If the right hon. Gentleman seeks to intervene at another time, it might be appropriate.

On the proposals in the Green Paper on schools, will the Minister tell us what empirical evidence there is to back up the idea that they constitute improvements? A study by Professor Gorard from the Cardiff university school of social sciences was published recently—perhaps even today. I hope that my quoting his academic research in aid of my argument will not lead to his being disparaged by the Government. He says in his abstract:

"The specialist schools programme is seen as a key way of transforming the 'bog standard' comprehensive education system. This has been portrayed as meeting the local needs of parents. However, there is little evidence that such a programme can make such an impact . . . In particular, it is shown, schools that have control of their own admission arrangements will benefit the most and lead to the creation of a two-tier education system".

He goes on:

"Our study has suggested that schools that are selective, or are their own admissions authorities, or are specialist tend to increase the socio-economic segregation of school intakes . . . When schools have two or more of these characteristics together—foundation specialist or selective specialist for example—this tendency is far stronger . . . Simply allowing more schools to become specialist, and perhaps allocate a proportion of their places to students on the basis of that specialism, cannot bring such changes about."

By that, he means improvements. He continues:

"Rather, specialisation could lead to several clear disadvantages without any obvious compensation for most families."

Will the Minister and her colleagues examine the available research and accept that their policy should be evidence-based, rather than simply put out for political reasons?

In terms of ensuring that the Government make plans, parents and their children want to know where this is all going to end. They want to know whether the gimmick-based, initiative-led reforms to our school system are going to mean the end of the comprehensive school. They also want to know how a selection system that could increase at any time beyond the Government's control, although only 7 per cent. of schools choose to select at the moment, is going to lead to more choice for parents.

When schools select, it is parents and their children who are selected against. If specialist schools select on the basis of ability, as they are effectively being invited to do, and if faith schools select on the basis of the faith—or the presumed or alleged faith—of the child's parents, a pool of students will be selected against. If more

resources are given to schools that have the freedom to select, the children who most need additional teachers will be left in schools without the resources and without the kudos to be able to select and recruit the teachers who are needed. That will not benefit the students who most need help.

On the Government's proposed reforms of the health care system, they seem to have decided that health authorities are going to be abolished without any planning or forethought as to where the public health function is going to rest. It is critical that public health is thought about at a local level, and that it does not all come out by diktat from the Department of Health.

There is no way in which the broad range of public health specialisms—for example, in environmental health, partnership building with local authorities, communicable disease control, health promotion and advice to commissioners—most of which are carried out by separate specialist public health consultants at health authority level, can possibly be delivered by a single public health consultant or trainee at primary care trust level. According to the Public Health Alliance, it is not yet clear what is going to happen to the public health function, which is possibly the most important function of health authorities—in value-added terms—in relation to health and quality of life.

In higher education, there has been an underfunded over-expansion of places, to the extent that when the clawback occurs for the universities that cannot fill their places, departments and campuses are closing. In NHS recruitment, the Government staged the nurses pay award in their first year in office in 1997, then fretted and wondered why so many nurses were leaving the health service.

The Government failed to plan early, in that they waited three years before expanding the number of places in medical schools—training places that were desperately needed and should have been filled at least three years earlier. The Conservatives were certainly complacent about our work force planning needs when they were in power. However, to delay for three years before starting to train the new doctors and nurses that we need for the future was a disaster of planning that will come back to haunt the Government.

Why do the Government claim that for schools to be diverse, they need to have different titles? We do not need a new structure for schools to offer different things. They do not need a specialism to be special. It is wrong that schools can buy higher quality with extra funding given to them only if they opt for one of these initiative-driven proposals.

A further question is, are the Government being honest? The Secretary of State's predecessor said clearly before the 1997 general election:

"Watch my lips. No selection by interview or examination under a Labour Government."

We have had no clear renunciation of that from the Labour party in words, only in actions. That is why there is great suspicion about the Government's real intentions with regard to the private sector. They do the opposite of what they say that they will do, they do not deliver what they say that they will deliver, and they develop policies that, before an election, they deny that they are going to develop—selection is one example.

[Dr. Harris]

If the Government cannot be honest with the electorate and with the House, at least they could be honest with their own party. However, nowhere in the education section of the briefing to Labour Members alluded to in yesterday's debate on the Queen's Speech does it mention the extent to which there will be freedom to engage the private sector in the delivery of services. There are five main bullet points and it simply is not referred to. Yes, the Secretary of State developed the point today, but she would not take interventions, so we are left dangling to consider the idea, which is tantalising for some, perhaps, that there might be extensive freedom for the private sector to be involved.

On free schools, I wonder whether the Conservatives won the election. They did not deserve to win it and the electorate did not give them that victory, but it appears to me that the drive to free schools, an admissions free-for-all and freedom to employ the private sector, despite there being no evidential backing for that, show that Ministers are delivering to the Conservatives an election victory on education that is most undeserved, unplanned and lacking in an evidential base.

The Government talk, semi-honestly, of there being more teachers. Of course there are more teachers, but there are more children. If we are to examine the figures sensibly, it is the ratio that counts. Simply saying that there are more teachers does not address whether quality is improving if class sizes are rising.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The hon. Gentleman takes a profoundly parochial and complacent view of this country's educational attainments. In that respect, he is similar to Ministers. What does he think that we in Britain can learn from the educational practice of Germany, France, Japan and New Zealand?

Dr. Harris: If there are lessons to learn, they are the ones that I am talking about: education policy should be evidence-based and planned for the long term; the electorate and Members of the legislature should know what they are entering into when proposals are first flagged; and the wider context should be considered when education policy is being delivered.

All hon. Members are concerned about what is happening in Oldham and what happened there in the run-up to the general election. I am happy to be corrected if I am wrong, but I understand that Oldham, which is a diverse community, has two Church of England secondary schools and that not one Muslim child attends either of them. The development of too great a freedom for individual schools over admissions policy, based on the religion or purported religion of parents, can lead to social segregation. I would like to know what the Minister will do to avoid such a situation as the freedom of schools to select on such lines expands.

On the NHS, we must consider policy in terms of the context. Regardless of who is to blame for staff shortages, although I would blame both Conservative and Labour Governments, it cannot be right or sensible to give NHS funding to private sector organisations in a blasé fashion to enable them to carry out work when that will lead to them recruiting from the NHS, which is the only source of staff. The Minister will accept that there are no pools

of unemployed nurses and doctors out there waiting to work, and providing such funding to the private sector will cause a greater reduction in capacity in the NHS and so more reliance on the private sector. A vicious circle will be created.

In the context of staff shortages in almost every health profession, have the Government, in their short-term desperation to meet false and counter-productive targets, given any thought to the effect on the NHS of giving taxpayers' money to the private sector to cream off staff in whose training it has not invested? There is no level playing field. The NHS, our universities and the public sector invest in training staff, but those staff might work in the private sector thanks to taxpayers' money—sometimes for the NHS, but, in the main, for people who can afford to go private rather than the poor with the greatest health needs, who are most reliant on the NHS. That requires the Government to explain whether they are thinking about the issue.

The Government entered the general election campaign making incompatible pledges: dramatically to improve public services, but not to increase fair taxation on those who can afford to pay for the investment in public services. Indeed, we know that the Government will raise tax, but they will do so stealthily, indirectly and unfairly. It is so sad that the only tax that they have ruled out increasing is the fair tax on those who are better off. I do not believe that the Government, without significantly increased investment, will be able to deliver what is needed to improve our public services.

The Government can no longer hide behind the Conservatives. In the previous Parliament, the Labour party spent a long time presenting the legacy of the previous Government as an excuse for every failure. Certainly, the Conservatives had an appalling record, but for the past two weeks the Government will have found that blaming "the legacy of the previous Government" has been truer than they can believe. On the delivery of public services, the Government can run for dishonest and unplanned options that have no evidential base, but they will not be able to hide.

3.15 pm

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): First, I offer my congratulations to the new Secretary of State and, indeed, to all her team. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), who made a number of interesting points. Some I agree with; others, I dispute.

I want to consider the Gracious Speech through the experiences of my constituency and the changes that have affected it and Barnsley as a whole since 1997. I also want to make a point about Labour's victory, which should be put to Opposition Members: the electorate rejected the individualism of the Thatcher years, and one can see that individuality has replaced individualism. That individuality, which is a far cry from individualism, became embedded over the second half of the previous century.

In the four years that Labour has been in power, it has done much to pronounce that value of individuality. Individuality, as opposed to individualism, is the way to ensure that we create the conditions to enable everyone to fulfil their potential. Individualism has held that aim back. Labour's election victory was built around the idea of individuality—creating the conditions in which people are able to fulfil their aspirations—and the Secretary of State made her points creatively when she addressed the House.

It is right to emphasise education, as well as health and crime, in the Queen's Speech. Education in my constituency has improved dramatically over the past four years. For example, before 1997 and in the last year in which the Tory party was in power, some schools in my constituency had bucket monitors. When it started to rain, named children fetched a bucket and put it under the leak in the roof. However, within a few months of Labour being elected, we had our first new school for 20 years and major refurbishments, which have altered the situation dramatically, were carried out across my constituency and across Barnsley.

We should consider the national figures. In 1996-97, which was the last year of the Tory Government, about £670 million was spent on refurbishing school buildings. Over the past year, this Government have spent more than £2 billion on refurbishing school buildings, and my constituency has benefited from that.

When a building is pleasing to children, it encourages and is conducive to their learning, and some of the results in primary schools in my constituency and across Barnsley show that the refurbishment programme and the hard work of teachers carried out within local education authority guidance have achieved increased standards. For example, in the last year of the Tory Government, only 55 per cent. of children aged 11 were reaching the required standard in reading and writing. In the past four years, there has been a 25 per cent. increase in that figure. Last year, almost 70 per cent. of children aged 11 were reaching the required standard in reading, writing and mathematics. Those standards have been achieved because this Government have put the necessary resources into schools and supported the hard work of teachers.

I visit the primary schools in my constituency regularly. Only last Friday, at the request of the pupils of St. John's junior school in Penistone, I opened their new computer suite. I saw the excitement on the faces of the children using the new computers under the guidance of a well-trained teacher. On some visits to my schools, I have found that eight-year-old children using the computer systems have been answering a question that was on the GCSE paper only two years ago. Thus my primary schools have benefited handsomely from a Labour Government being in power.

In 1997, my local authority collected statistics demonstrating Barnsley's deprived position. They showed that we needed to create 19,000 jobs by 2001 just to lift us up to the national employment average. The same survey showed that the average income on council estates across Barnsley was between only £5,000 and £6,000 a year, which gives hon. Members an idea of how deprived the area was.

That deprivation, caused largely by the economic dislocation imposed on the area by an indifferent Tory Government, left us with a legacy that had to be picked up. The challenge has been accepted by the Government and we are now seeing the improvements in education to which I have referred. Those improvements are important for Barnsley's regeneration. It is realised that if we are to attract industry into Barnsley, we must have a much better education system and be able to provide industry with the skills that are required.

It would appear that, within the regeneration programme, industry is responding. We have already created between 8,000 and 9,000 jobs. Although we still

have a long way to go before achieving the 19,000 jobs that are required, it is fair to say that, as a result of the Government's economic programme, we can see the light at the end of the tunnel—although it is a long tunnel.

We have been discussing how the education culture is changing, and I referred to the way in which the changed values in society impacted during the election. Clearly, the perceived value of the education system relates to individuality. In that regard, I share the view of the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon when he spoke about the change to faith schools and selection.

There is much to be gained from creating the conditions necessary to pursue individuality. Much of the gain could be lost if we were to revert to selection and specialisation in some of our schools. If we did that, we would risk creating a two-tier system, so we must be very cautious. I urge the Secretary of State to look carefully at the matter before making those changes, because all that we have gained in creating the conditions for individuality could be lost if we were to make the wrong move in developing the secondary sector.

The issue of health is also enormously important to my constituency and to Barnsley generally. The 1997 survey to which I referred also looked at the health problems across Barnsley and my constituency. It identified the fact that 30 per cent. of households—nearly a third—have a disabled person. Much of that disability results from Barnsley's heavy industrial base in coal mining and steel, and many of those being cared for suffer from respiratory diseases as a result of coal mining.

I thank the Government for much of the work that they have done, particularly in setting up a system of payment for former miners suffering from respiratory diseases and a scheme that pays compensation to miners suffering from vibration white finger. The Coalfields Regeneration Trust is also helping to rebuild our communities. In the days of economic dislocation, Barnsley's communities started to unravel and they needed to be rebuilt. That is beginning to happen with the help of the coalfield regeneration fund.

Given Barnsley's high rate of heart disease and strokes, much can be gained from having a health service that can provide for the community's needs. South Yorkshire's health action zone works with the local health authority. However, because the health authority started from a very low base, the percentage increases have not been sufficient to provide the resources needed to tackle Barnsley's health problems. That needs to be looked at. Although a lot of work has been done within the health action zone, in health as in education there are dangers in involving the private sector. It all comes down to a question of ethics: the ethic of individuality as opposed to that of individualism; providing a service for need as opposed to one for profit. We must look carefully before extending the private sector into health service provision.

I have referred to the crime scene and I welcome the reference in the Gracious Speech to a new police Bill, particularly the setting up of a criminal assets recovery unit. I chair Barnsley's community safety partnership which, as some Members will recall, was set up under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Barnsley ran a community safety project from 1995. As a result of much of the work that we did in the town, it was taken as a template for many of the projects introduced via the 1998 Act. It has

[Mr. Michael Clapham]

worked, bringing the police together with the local authority and with voluntary bodies. It has enabled us to assess our problems and target help on them.

However, Barnsley has a drugs problem. The drugs action team reports that every 41st person in Barnsley regularly takes heroin. We have a population of some 237,000 people, which means that 6,000 people regularly take heroin. That is the source of crime in my area: 70 per cent. of crime in my constituency and across Barnsley is drugs-driven.

We must reconsider the strategy. The drugs tsar set out the three planks of his strategy: education, treatment and stifling supply on the streets. We have had some success, but stifling supply on the streets is enormously difficult. The decision of the police in London to concentrate their resources on hard rather than on soft drugs is a step forward. The problem in Barnsley is heroin, which is becoming a drug of first use. We must concentrate our resources to ensure that we tackle the problem of hard drugs.

I want to refer to the health and safety aspect of the Queen's Speech. The Cullen report will be taken forward in new legislation. It is important that that is done. The railway industry has a poor health and safety record, and it needs to be bettered. In the press today, it is reported that last month 50 trains went through red lights, so there is still an enormous problem, which must be dealt with via legislation.

Railtrack has failed, so I should like the Government to consider whether to bring the track back into public ownership. I think that there is a case for that. An opinion poll during the general election showed that 90 per cent. of the public are in favour of Railtrack being brought back into public ownership. I urge the Government to sit down with the unions in the rail industry—especially the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers—and talk about the issues to work out a strategy for the future. It may be possible for a non-profit-making organisation to run Railtrack. I believe that, given the pronounced problem, strong health and safety legislation is required.

The Gracious Speech referred to NATO. I sit on the NATO parliamentary assembly and I am concerned about some of the plans for expansion. We must be extremely careful about expanding NATO, and should ensure that it is expanded into some of the former Soviet Union republics only if there is consent and understanding. In March, the civil dimensions of security committee met at the Duma in Moscow to discuss some of Russia's fears regarding the expansion of NATO, which were well founded. Anyone who has followed the son of star wars debate will have read in the press this week about Mr. Putin's meeting with President Bush. The Russians have made it clear that if the anti-ballistic missile treaty were ditched, it would push the world into another arms race. Britain has an important part to play. We should make it clear that there should be a European strategy on son of star wars, rather than different countries taking their own separate initiatives.

The Queen's Speech offers a great deal. It clearly shows our plans for revitalising public services, which I believe will be achieved in the programme for this Session and for the next three years. I am confident that we can accomplish what we set out in our manifesto.

3.35 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham). The House was pleased to hear of the improvement in the quality of life of his constituents. At the beginning of his speech, he expressed his philosophy on why his party won the general election. I think that the reason was quite simple. I believe that some time ago the country decided to give the Labour party a second term, and there was little that either side could have done about it once that decision was taken.

I shall make a brief contribution, because I am conscious that many other hon. Members wish to speak. I shall say a word about health, a word about education, and then I shall pick up on the comments made by the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) about Parliament.

If health and education are to be two of the themes for this Session, it is odd that the Bill banning tobacco advertising is out and the Bill banning hunting is in. The hunting Bill is hardly central to the delivery of better public services, and it is totally irrelevant to the needs of rural areas, which are trying to recover from the worst crisis in 50 years. Some of my colleagues may have had reservations about the tobacco advertising and promotion Bill, but I agree with the Chairman of the Select Committee on Health, who said on the "Today" programme this morning that it was the single most effective public health measure. Advertising validates and reinforces an activity that kills more than 100,000 people a year, and I hope that it will not be too long before time is found for that Bill.

Turning to other health issues with a political flavour, what happened in Wyre Forest is a lesson to all of us—the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) may catch your eye later on, Mr. Speaker. It showed the high price paid if an MP fails to get on top of a sensitive local issue and ceases to be the buckle between Parliament and people. It also shows the anti-politician mood that is out there, which has led to an appetite for voting for the non-politician who is campaigning on a single issue. I predict that there will be a lot more of that next time round, and we all need to be on our toes.

On the Government's wish to confront vested interests in health and education, they seem to have got off to a bad start. They have driven to the verge of industrial action the least militant group of public servants in the country: the general practitioners. I hope that Health Ministers will urgently build bridges with GPs, who run the most cost-effective and most popular part of the NHS.

There are a number of reasons why GPs' patience is running out: the increase in paperwork; the ever-expanding work load; shorter consultation times; endless reform; and more litigation. It is a sobering thought that the cost of outstanding legal claims against the NHS is a third of its annual budget. There is a more general point to be made on a separate occasion about our becoming a more litigious society and the injury that does to our fellow citizens, who, in effect, have to pay for it.

Failure to get on top of the waiting list problem has also created difficulties for GPs, who have to manage patients who are not getting the service that they expect.

Yesterday, I received a letter from a constituent who underwent breast cancer surgery in February. In fairness to the NHS, she said:

"I cannot speak too highly about the care I have been given thus far."

In May, she was told by her oncologist that she would need radiotherapy, and that it would probably start in July. More recently, because of the waiting list, the approaching holiday period and the shortage of staff to work the machinery, she was told that she will still be waiting to hear about her appointment in August. That shows the challenge on delivery that the Government face.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Which of the professions to which the right hon. Gentleman has just referred have a training period that is shorter than the length of the last Administration?

Sir George Young: My point was made in a spirit of amiable consensus. The Government must confront this challenge because they have raised expectations. My constituent's expectations were raised, and she is disappointed that, having had the surgery, she is having to wait an indefinite period for the radiotherapy.

That leads me to the issue of resources, which I have previously raised with Ministers. They regard Hampshire as a county so healthy that we get just over £80 per capita for every £100 that the rest of the country receives. The Government's own independent assessors say that they can find no justification for that figure, and until we get realistic resources to deliver the services that people expect, the Government will struggle to convince my constituents that the NHS is improving. In Andover, we have a popular local hospital. Substantial investment is needed to bring it up to date, and to cope with the requirements of an expanding town; yet a document published recently by the health authority suggested the making of economies, rather than investment in the building. That is another good example of the challenge that confronts the Government on delivery.

The issue of resources leads me to my next point, which concerns social services. It does not make sense to pump money into the national health service and then starve social services; that leads to blocked beds and to extra admissions to hospital, because care in the community breaks down. The Government recognised that last year, when they found some welcome emergency funds in the winter to deal with bed-blocking, but such moves are not a lasting solution in Hampshire. We are spending over standard spending assessment on social services, but the county cannot pay enough to nursing and residential care homes, so they are closing. That simply is not joined-up government.

On health, the question arises of partnership with the private sector. If the Government want to pick a fight with the public sector trade unions, so be it, but an easier way of re-engaging the private sector would be to revisit the role of independent health insurance. The withdrawal of tax relief caused some people to cancel health insurance policies when they retired. That placed an additional burden on the NHS, and reduced the total spent on health.

I think that the Government should explore with employers and unions the idea of expanding private health insurance—providing it not just for directors and senior staff, but for the entire work force of companies and, indeed, their families. That would help to change the perception of the private sector, and I think the Government would find that the unions were on their side rather than against them.

Let me say a word about schools, prompted by discussion at the school gate during the election campaign. There is a real problem with recruitment. One school in my constituency is recruiting maths teachers from Bulgaria, and awaiting the issue of work permits. A head teacher in another school has solved the problem by advertising for new teachers before any of his existing teachers have handed in their notice, on the basis that some will leave and he wants first pick—preferring the risk of having too many teachers to that of having too few.

We need a much better regime for disruptive pupils, who seem to be getting younger and younger. Simply excluding them is not the answer. I suspect that I am not alone in finding that more and more of my constituency case load is devoted to finding an appropriate regime for excluded children.

Let me respond to the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush by saying a word about Parliament. Low voter turnout and the marginalisation of Parliament are two sides of the same coin. Last week I heard the word "humility"—from, I think, the Prime Minister. Nowhere is humility needed more than in the Government's dealings with Parliament, but I have to say that very little was visible in the last Parliament.

We have seen the Liaison Committee's report "Shifting the Balance", and the Norton commission's report on strengthening Parliament. This week, the Hansard Society published a report on the same theme. I want to make three brief suggestions. The first relates to Prime Minister's Question Time, which I think should be restructured to allow a sustained line of questioning on a particular theme. Of 179 Members, 128 believe that it is not currently an effective means of securing information or explanation from the Government—and I believe that the present cabaret is partly responsible for the fact that people feel remote and disengaged from Parliament.

Secondly, I think it wrong for the Leader of the House to chair the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons. The Leader of the House is the Government's business manager: it is his or her job to get the legislative programme through the House. The Select Committee is a Committee of the House of Commons, making recommendations on how the House can hold the Government to account. There could not be a clearer conflict of interests than that caused by making the Leader of the House head of that Committee. The illogicality is demonstrated by the fact that the one Select Committee that never receives a response from the Government is the Modernisation Committee: that shows how close the relationship is.

The job of the House of Commons is to put a sleeping policeman in front of the legislative juggernaut. If I may pursue the analogy, our job is to get the driver out of the cab, and to ask him where he is going and what he has on board. The risk is that owing to pressure of time we will simply wave him through, sometimes without even slowing him down—hoping that he will be caught speeding in the other place.

[Sir George Young]

Finally, I hope that we can dispense with the automatic timetabling of every single Bill. That approach is inflexible: the timetable is fixed before we even know how many Government amendments there will be. I hope that the Leader of the House will agree to informal, flexible arrangements, which I believe could work far better.

The new Leader of the House was described by the Chancellor, on Monday's "Today" programme, as a reforming one. Having listened to him at business questions, I have my doubts. In any event, in the longer term, whether he is or is not a reforming Leader of the House may be more important than any of the Bills mentioned in the Queen's Speech.

3.45 pm

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): I, too, congratulate the new members of the Cabinet.

It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, and I am delighted to be part of a Labour Government who have been returned for a second term. I am also delighted that the Queen's Speech referred to public services. In the few minutes for which I intend to detain the House, I want to refer especially to public services in my constituency, and to some of the problems that we experience in ensuring that they are delivered properly.

Like many other Labour Members, I campaigned on health, education and law and order, and the response in my constituency was positive. Unfortunately the turnout was low, but 70 per cent. of those who voted voted Labour. That compares with the result in earlier elections. The only way in which public services can be delivered—and were delivered during the last Parliament—is through a strong and stable economy, and I am pleased that the Queen's Speech referred to a continuation of the Government's economic policies.

The turnout in my constituency was as low as 46 per cent. That is lower than the national average, and caused me considerable concern. In fact, it should concern us all that such a large proportion of my constituents were disengaged from the political process. We have heard one or two reasons for the existence of such voter apathy in today's debate.

As I have said, 70 per cent. of my constituents who voted voted Labour. I could therefore say that there was considerable contentment with the results of the first four years of Labour government, and that I need not worry, because my constituents are happy with what the Labour Government have done. So low was the turnout, however, that I have no idea what the 55 per cent. or so who did not vote were thinking. They may have been thinking the opposite.

Mr. Clapham: They certainly were not thinking Conservative.

Mr. Illsley: I was thrown from a minute then. I was trying to work out the difference between individuality and individualism. However, I fully endorse all that my hon. Friend said, although I did not understand a word of it.

Although, as I say, it could be said that voters in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend were contented with Labour, the low turnout was a worry. It could well be that a large proportion of my constituents did not vote because they saw no difference between our Government and the last, or did not think that services were being delivered in the way that they wanted. There may have been dissatisfaction with some aspects of our public services, notably in local government. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) about the need to re-engage with local government, particularly councillors, and ensuring that councillors are accountable and are given the tools and the money with which to fulfil their function.

Public services do not involve just health and education. They involve law and order, street cleansing and social services; they involve the provision of home helps and warden services and, in particular, council housing. All those services are issues in my constituency. Considerable concern was expressed about those issues even among people who supported Labour, who raised that point on the doorstep during our canvassing. There are problems of law and order on certain estates in my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) mentioned drug dealers and nuisance neighbours. Only a couple of days ago, a case was reported to me involving drug dealers. They have put cameras all around houses to alert them to when the police arrive to try to make an arrest following deliberate disturbances: people are moving in and out of properties all hours of the day and night buying and selling drugs.

Those people use unlicensed, unregistered, untaxed vehicles. They cause problems for the other people on the street, or on the estate, to the point where those people are frightened to leave their homes, to complain or to do anything—the dealers fire guns and all the rest of it. When approached by the police, they simply say, "You cannot do anything to me. You cannot touch me—I am beyond the law." In effect, they are because the police have considerable difficulty in obtaining prosecutions for that type of nuisance neighbour. Very little can be done about the problem unless some extra resource is given to our police to deal with it.

In my local authority, we have a new cabinet system of government with area forums. We engaged on a community plan whereby we asked members of the public to state their priorities—to state what they wanted from local and national Government. Instead of the priority being things such as education and employment, it was the environment, particularly cleaning the environment: cleaning up the rubbish, graffiti and environmental damage that have accumulated over the past few years because the "other services" block grant within the local government financial settlement has been squeezed as money has been given to education, social services and other front-line services. The money available for environmental cleaning has been reduced year on year. The public have now said that they would like their priorities to be recognised.

My local authority has recently had to propose charges on home helps and the warden service. Again, that has not gone down well with elderly constituents in particular, who feel that they contributed throughout their lifetime to national insurance and tax so that such services would be in place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone referred to the level of serious illness in the Barnsley area. Only a few days ago, a local newspaper reported that one in three ex-miners suffer from some form of disabling disease. Coupled with the rate of local income that he mentioned, that is a cause of acute concern. Basically, local government services have been cut, while the council tax has increased to cover the shortfall in the local government settlements.

My constituency has many problems with council housing, which is a major public service. This morning, I had a telephone call from a Minister to tell me that she was visiting Barnsley this afternoon. It is unfortunate that I could not be there to show her some of our problems. Surprisingly, parts of estates are unlettable, which results in houses being boarded up. Therefore, some tenants have the problem of living in between empty, boarded-up houses, which are a magnet for vandalism, criminal damage and all the rest of it.

The local authority has been left with only one solution to try to deal with that problem: to demolish the council houses. It seems crazy that, in a constituency where up to 3,000 people are waiting for council houses, we are demolishing them. However, it appears to be the only way out. The Government options to deal with that problem are arm's-length companies, stock transfer or the status quo. At present, we are simply subsidising the Treasury by collecting rents, because they are deducted from housing benefit and the minimum repairs allowance, so the money goes back to the Treasury. That means that we cannot afford repairs and capital investment in the housing stock.

Stock transfer has already been rejected in a vote by tenants of the council estates, so we cannot progress that idea. The Government have said that the use of arm's-length companies will be on offer only to local authorities that are classed as excellent in the management of their housing stock. My local authority is extremely good at managing its housing stock, but it will be precluded from forming an arm's-length company. Therefore, we face a huge problem with council housing.

Again, that came across loud and clear throughout the election campaign. Basically, council tenants are saying that they would like the council to remain their landlord. The Government should look at the idea of allowing the council to continue in that role. As I said, our council taxes have increased in exchange for poorer and poorer services. That could be one of the reasons for the particularly low turnout in my constituency.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health knows, on a number of occasions I have raised the fact that my health authority is one of the most poorly funded in the Trent region and in the country as a whole. I have mentioned that, although there is a great desire to improve things, we are simply not getting the money at the speed that we would like. At the end of this financial year, my health authority went into the red by a considerable amount. Health authorities are not allowed to show a deficit, so the local health authority had to borrow to balance its books, yet the area has among the highest rates of heart disease, stroke and, in particular, cancer. I say again to my right hon. Friend that we are the lowest funded authority in the Trent region. We hope that he will address that matter, together with some of the other issues that I have raised with him.

The local authority runs a civic theatre that is being refurbished and, to assist with that, the authority submitted an application for lottery funding. Such applications are decided by the Arts Council. The theatre has been closed for about three years, which means that local operatic and dramatic societies no longer have a base from which to operate. Yet again, because we are Barnsley, our application for lottery money has been turned down.

It sticks in the craw of Barnsley people, who contribute more than the average to national lottery funding, that we seem to get nothing out of it. It sticks in the craw of Barnsley people when huge amounts of money go to theatres in London, yet our theatre will remain closed until the local authority can find the £3 million funding to refurbish it. I wish that the Government would look again at lottery distribution, so that that funding is distributed more fairly.

I welcome most of what is in the Queen's Speech, particularly the measures on education. I shall not repeat what has been said about that. The hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) mentioned the importance of further education. Barnsley college will release 120 lecturers on voluntary redundancy at the end of this month as part of cuts that have been forced upon it as a consequence of the shortfall in funding that will occur at the end of July.

The college has lost income as a result of having to stop franchising courses. The idea of franchising came in under the previous Government with the incorporation of colleges. For some colleges, it was an invitation to go down the wrong route. It has resulted in my college having to repay £5.9 million to the Further Education Funding Council, now the Learning and Skills Council, and having a £2 million shortfall in its annual budget.

Consequently, as I said, there will be 120 redundancies at Barnsley college at the end of this month, and there will be further compulsory redundancies. The sad fact is that those lecturers will be losing their jobs for reasons such as bad management and franchising that are not their fault. I ask Ministers to consider providing assistance to the college to mitigate the effect of the drastic redundancies that will be made in the next few weeks.

As I said, a sound economy has been the key to Labour's success. I hope that continued economic success will enable us to continue providing its fruits in the form of better public services to our electorates. I also hope that Ministers will bear in mind my comments when it comes to the debate on the Labour heartlands—areas such as mine—particularly in relation to local government services, and will try to give us a better deal.

4.1 pm

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate on the Loyal Address. One of the most gracious acts that I have heard about recently was the posthumous award of the George medal to Eliza Ward, who gave her life trying to protect her boss. Her family, who received the award at Buckingham palace and would not usually be associated with loyalty in some people's eyes, were thrilled with Her Majesty's graciousness, which was reflected in the Gracious Speech.

I sometimes wonder, however, how much Her Majesty thinks about the meaning of the Queen's Speech. Although I believe that some parts of yesterday's Speech

[Rev. Martin Smyth]

are helpful for the country at large, I question other parts of it. As for a Bill to ban tobacco advertising, something seems to be wrong when we are spending money to help people quit nicotine but will not spend similar sums on people with mental health problems. I believe that the Chancellor has been wrong in the way in which he has taxed tobacco, to the detriment of our economy and work force. Nevertheless, recognising the number of people who die from an over-indulgence in tobacco, I am amazed that a tobacco advertising Bill was not mentioned in the Gracious Speech.

As the Secretary of State for Health will remember, I have previously raised the issue of general practitioner numbers and the reasons why so many of them are leaving the profession. Although Ministers have been talking about increasing GP numbers, I have learned that only about 100 people are in training to become GPs, whereas the Government's own targets show that 400 new GPs are needed across the United Kingdom. I therefore urge Ministers to reconsider the overall issue of GP practice.

Reform of the health service's management may be needed in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, none of us should make the mistake of thinking that current health service managers will not continue to manage the health service if they sidestep into other positions. For years, that fact has been the secret behind all the reforms of the health service's management. It would be helpful if the Government, who have been urged to commission independent researchers to investigate the issue, were given some straight answers. Managers are practitioners of the art of presenting figures to suit themselves, and it is sometimes difficult for Ministers to learn what is really happening.

I was fascinated by some of the speeches in yesterday's debate, particularly by the comments on Northern Ireland by the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson). I do not know whether it was a confession or a slip of the tongue, but he said:

"Please do not let your principles get in the way of your interests."—[Official Report, 20 June 2001; Vol. 370, c. 79.]

I believe that there are some principles for which we have to stand.

I pay tribute to the professionals in our public services. As in this place or in any other community of people, there are those who do their work better than others, whereas others will try to avoid work, which is about the only four-letter word that is still taboo. Nevertheless, most people in the professions do a magnificent job in difficult circumstances. Many of them work longer hours than some hon. Members seem to want to work. We should not presume upon those professionals, but provide them with the best back-up possible. They are the ones who teach our children and deal with patients. They are also the ones who do the social work that we leave them with while we criticise them. I pay tribute to them.

Nevertheless, one has to ask certain questions. I ask some of them now because, as I understand it, responsibility for law and order and security in Northern Ireland still rests with this place. For many years, there have been questions about secure accommodation for young people who need care and protection. At the beginning of this week, we had a conference that was attended by one of the magistrates who has regularly

returned young people to family care as no secure accommodation was available. Social workers have done their best to care for those young people, and some of the families themselves have requested that those young people be placed in secure accommodation for their own protection, but magistrates have had to return some of those young people to their families.

Just a week ago, in north Belfast, one of those young people, a young man, fell from a block of flats and died. No one was prepared to understand that he needed special help. From all accounts, another young man, whose grandmother and other family members asked to be taken into protection, is now working for a gentleman who uses him as a rent boy. It is time that our authorities got their act together to provide protection for younger people.

I should like to address many other issues, but shall finish with a few remarks on regrettable recent events in Northern Ireland, where there were more riots yesterday evening. I wonder whether the British Government and other Governments around the world have begun to understand the message that they are sending to those who no longer want to use the parliamentary process but are prepared to riot, whether it is against capitalism or as happened in Oldham. What messages have we sent to those people by the way we have dealt with law and order in Northern Ireland? In a sense, we have crucified the protectors of the people. Yesterday evening, those protectors were again caught between two groups. As certain groups are not prepared to back the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Government have continued to go down the wrong road in dealing with the situation.

I have received a letter from Mr. Michael Sing, from Londonderry, in which he asks me to ask the Prime Minister a certain question on the Floor of the House. Although, as hon. Members know, it is difficult to ask the Prime Minister a question in such circumstances, Mr. Sing's question is fascinating—especially considering how difficult it was for some of us to discover what was happening in the discussions on the framework document. During those discussions, Ulster Unionist Members were not allowed to have any information from our then Conservative Government about the likely course of events. We went to see the then Minister, now the Conservative party chairman, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), and we were supposed to be told what was happening. He was prepared to discuss only the heads of agreement, but was amazed to discover that we knew more about what was in the document than he had realised. We were getting the information from Dublin newspapers. The Dublin Government regularly communicated with Sinn Féin and the SDLP, whereas we in the House were not told, because the agreement was between two sovereign Governments.

The Belfast agreement is known for purposes of spin as the Good Friday agreement. If it had been signed on 1 April, we would have been quick to call it the April Fools or All Fools agreement. It was signed by two Governments, and I query whether Sinn Féin ever signed it, despite what people say about all the signatories.

The letter says:

"As a person who voted in favour and in support of the (Good Friday Agreement). I am considering as to the merits of voting at all!"

I thought that rather apt in the light of the comment made by the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley). The letter raises the question whether

"Washington, London, and Dublin will embark on a sustained and 'Joint' programme at home and abroad to create a situation that will bring about"

the abandonment of Ireland's neutrality and its accession to NATO, with the price being the separation of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom.

I put it to the House that we are responsible for the whole of the Kingdom, be it the Welsh Principality, the Scots nation, the Province of Northern Ireland or the regions of England. The Government must pledge themselves in negotiations with the United States not to listen only to those who are not happy with President Bush's views on defence. It is important to learn from the past. If rogue states have bombed our territory by providing Semtex for terrorism here, the United States must be prepared, if it wants to use our country as a base for its activities, to provide the same protection for our people as for its own. Such protection must be in the legislation dealing with our international relationships, and I hope that the House will take cognisance of that.

4.12 pm

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): It is a great privilege to have the opportunity to make my maiden speech so early in the Session. I am conscious of the honour bestowed on me by my constituents, and I thank them for electing me.

I pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Malcolm Chisholm. He was first elected to the House as the Member of Parliament for Leith in 1992 and was re-elected in 1997 for the enlarged constituency of Edinburgh, North and Leith. He served as a Minister in the Scottish Office in 1997. In 1999, he was elected to the Scottish Parliament as a Member for the same constituency, and he quickly gained the respect of people there for his integrity and honesty. I am delighted to say that he was appointed last year as a Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care in the Scottish Executive. In addition to his commitment to the Scottish Parliament and Government, he continues to be an assiduous and hard-working constituency Member. He has given and continues to give me much support as a candidate and, since my election, as a Member of Parliament. He is held in high regard throughout the constituency and I will be well satisfied if I can earn a similar respect there.

The two parts of my constituency have been represented by a long line of right hon. and hon. Members who made their mark in public life in a variety of ways. In 1992, Malcolm Chisholm took the seat from Ron Brown, who, as some may recall, played from time to time what might be called a colourful role in the House. Before him, Leith's Labour Member was Ronald King Murray, who left the House in 1979 to serve as a judge in the Court of Session and High Court of Justiciary, from which appointment he has recently retired, having fulfilled his judicial duties most ably.

The Edinburgh, North part of my constituency was for some years represented by the late Sir Alex Fletcher, who I know was held in high esteem across the political spectrum.

I note that I appear to be the first Leith Member to be not just a Labour Member but a Labour and Co-operative Member. I am proud to be the first to carry the Co-operative as well as the Labour banner.

As its name indicates, my constituency brings together the port of Leith with part of Edinburgh proper. Indeed, notwithstanding the name "Edinburgh, North", it takes in much of the city centre, starting from Princes street and the New Town and running down to the Firth of Forth. It encompasses many distinctive local communities. Leith and Edinburgh both have a strong sense of community and civic identity, with proud histories.

Indeed, Edinburgh is one of those places of which it can truly be said that its origins are lost in the mists of time. In my researches for this speech, I was intrigued to discover that one historian in the 16th century suggested that Edinburgh had been founded in 889 BC. I am disappointed to say that modern historians consider that date a millennium or two premature. Nevertheless, Edinburgh has a long history, as does the port of Leith.

As is often the case with two neighbouring communities, the history of Leith has often been defined in terms of its uneasy relationship with its larger neighbour. For almost 90 years, up to 1920, Leith was independent of Edinburgh. Some of the port's older residents still speak with some resentment of its incorporation into Edinburgh by Parliament in the face of a 5:1 vote against in a referendum of the people of Leith in 1919. Controversy over local government boundaries is not a new phenomenon.

Notwithstanding their long and varied histories, it is probably the past decade, or even the past five years, that has witnessed the most dramatic changes in Edinburgh and Leith. Leith was traditionally the port of Edinburgh, making much of its living from the sea or from industries indirectly associated with it. Such activity has now declined considerably as a source of employment, although the port is still a major feature of central Leith. A massive redevelopment of the waterfront area is under way and will accelerate over the next few years.

Edinburgh as a whole is now a city of dynamism and confidence, a state of affairs to which the most significant recent contribution has been the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, helping to make it once again a true European capital city. Moreover, thanks in no small part to the Government's economic policies and the progressive leadership of the city's council, of which I have been privileged to be a member for many years, Edinburgh has a vibrant economy, and over the past four years unemployment has fallen by more than 60 per cent.

However, as in many cities in which the general picture is one of economic prosperity, there are areas in my constituency, and sectors of society, that suffer severe deprivation and social exclusion. I believe that the Government's tax and welfare policies give us for the first time ever the possibility of lifting such areas and the people who live in them out of poverty once and for all.

My constituency is a fascinating place, with a rich variety of people, communities and cultures. I am proud to represent it in Parliament, especially as I am not a native of the city, although I have lived there for more than 25 years and have grown to love it very much. The constituency is very mixed, but the benefits of Labour policies over the past four years and the improvements in public services can be seen everywhere.

[Mr. Mark Lazarowicz]

Much of our debate has concentrated on education. That is of course a devolved matter, but my constituents are pleased that the £83 million public-private partnership investment will bring to the constituency four new or totally refurbished schools.

My constituents also know that, in some cases, public services are not of the quality that they should be, and they want further improvements in them. Above all, they are interested in results and they want pragmatic solutions that will work, which is why I heartily welcome the Government's decision to place investment and reform in the public services at the centre of their agenda for a second term. Exactly how that reform will be achieved will doubtless be debated further today and will be debated in the House and elsewhere in future.

In closing, as a Labour and Co-operative Member, may I express the hope that the Government will bear in mind the special features and advantages that the co-operative and mutual model can bring to the provision of public services? I note with interest the suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) on the rail industry; his idea on that issue is worthy of consideration.

4.20 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz) and hear his maiden speech. I am not sure which clan the Lazarowiczs are affiliated to, but he wove his own tartan this afternoon, and I am sure that we all look forward to him elaborating his themes and talking about his constituency. He paid proper tribute to his predecessor, who was well respected in the House; the hon. Gentleman's commitment to his constituency, his understanding of its needs and his intention to enjoy it, which is important for a Member a Parliament, came through clearly from his speech. He is certainly a welcome colleague and a worthy opponent.

I wish to ask for the indulgence of the House as I want to talk about something that is extremely important for my constituency but is not the main theme for today—the foot and mouth outbreak, which is of such imminent and urgent importance that I believe that the House will understand why I wish to raise it. Since the general election was called, there have been 80 confirmed cases and one slaughter on suspicion in my constituency and the neighbouring part of Lancashire. In addition, 326 premises have been culled out; nearly 250,000 animals will have been slaughtered in the few weeks since the Prime Minister announced that he intended to dissolve Parliament.

My constituency had already been at a standstill for weeks before that because of the impact of foot and mouth in Wensleydale, Cumbria, Lancashire and Bradford. When the rest of the country believed that things were over—indeed, the Government were telling us that the disease was under control and all the graphs happily pointed to it petering out on or about 7 June—we had a virulent, violent and destructive outbreak that consumed all other activity. For many of my constituents, the general election was a surreal event taking place on a distant planet.

First, we had a long silence. For two weeks after the outbreak, we did not hear a word from any Minister of any description to acknowledge that it even existed. The sense of rising anger was palpable; people felt that they were being left to cope with the outbreak by themselves. Not merely did the world not know about the outbreak, it did not want to know about it. Then, we felt a sense of claustrophobic embattlement. Anybody who has driven down certain roads and seen fields where there used to be animals, but where there is now nothing, or witnessed the absolute silence and people not coming out of their houses, will have picked up a palpable sense of paranoia that is almost intimidating.

Anger followed, because nobody understood what was happening and did not want to know about the unfolding drama. We had no information and nobody explained what was happening, so we had myths, which will always take the place of information when it is lacking. We now have myths that are so virulent that they have almost become gospel. There is the myth that in 1998 the Government agreed with the European Union simply to remove the livestock industry from the United Kingdom. Some people believe that passionately. There is also the belief that on 8 June there would be a super-cull of all the remaining animals; that was part of the same process. We even had the myth—it sounds comic, but one has to live in this atmosphere to understand how it was born—that Saddam Hussein was flying across the constituency in a helicopter, chucking out infected meat. That sounds comic, and people laugh at it instinctively, but one has to have experienced the sense of living on a nervous edge to understand why those myths took root.

It is vital that the Government deal, first, with the rumours and say simply that those things are not true. That may be self-evident, but sometimes what is self-evident has to be expressed. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs came to the House today to make a statement. That was a good start, but she should also explain what is happening. The former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was booking hotel rooms around the country, reserving lorry parks and putting logistics in place. It was perfectly sensible to do so because its epidemiologists were trying to forecast where there might be another problem and be ahead of it, not behind it. People are mature enough to understand that that is a sensible activity; they should not pick it up from rumour and assume that it indicates that a plot or conspiracy is afoot and that the Government know something that they do not.

A consequence of that is that officials of the Ministry, whom I commend, were exposed to all sorts of media interrogations on public platforms. Frankly, that is the job of Ministers, and we should not ask officials to undertake it. If, in addition, there is evidence that the disease has been spread because of improper observation of the rules and negligence, it is important that that is spelt out and that prosecutions follow. Once again, we have rumours, we have hints of a cause, but substance has not been given to those hints. In a landscape of shifting sentiment, it is important that as many anchors as possible should be put in place.

The efficiency of the operation has been generally acknowledged. I know that there have been incidences of blunders, wrong decisions and cases in which things have gone wrong but, on the whole, farmers in my constituency

accept that the cull was carried out efficiently and with sensitivity. The problem is what has happened since. There is an enormous bottleneck in the people available to advise on cleansing operations. Farmers whose premises were culled out a month ago are still waiting to get an indication of what will take place and a timetable for rehabilitation and reoccupation. We need a bible of what happens. The real problem is not a shortage of vets; it is a myth that that is a problem. Quite frankly, vets are doing jobs that less-qualified people could do, but there is a terrible shortage of animal health officers. There are 11 animal health officers available to deal with the outbreak in my area, when usually we have five. As a result, only some 50-odd premises out of the 500 infected in Yorkshire are on the way to being cleansed and eventually brought back into use.

Of course, farmers whose animals have been culled receive compensation. If we are honest, the valuations have been relatively generous. Some of my greatest concern is reserved for farmers in my constituency whose animals have not had foot and mouth; frankly, it is in their every economic interest for their animals to get it as soon as possible. The Secretary of State announced some relaxation of movement controls, but those farmers are utterly imprisoned and have no prospect of compensation. They are simply waiting to see whether the disease will eventually advance and strike their holdings, whereas the farmers whose animals have caught the disease will ultimately receive compensation.

I have a great fear of the possibility of conflict in the countryside. Thousands of businesses have been brought to a halt by the outbreak and have been offered pittance assistance. I accept that the Government will not give collateral aid or direct compensation to businesses that have lost out as a result of foot and mouth. I do not think that any Government would do that and it is not realistic to ask for it, but the relatively small measures for such businesses pale into insignificance in comparison with some of the cheques that will go to farmers.

I do not dispute the trauma of the slaughter and the impact on families who have spent generations building herds. I am not suggesting that compensation is a pay-off for the trauma that a family suffers, but it will enable some to get out and some to go on.

Many businesses now face a summer that is already shot as far as they are concerned. Many parts of the country are now talking about getting back to business, but we face the prospect of no business, because there is no realistic prospect of the countryside being freed up this side of the summer. That will lead to a winter, for some at least, of bankruptcy. It is important to realise how much businesses depend on each other in the countryside. Farmers must be sensitive to the needs of other businesses, just as other businesses must understand the susceptibility and nervousness of farmers when it comes to opening up the countryside and footpaths being brought back into use.

I hope that the Government will not funk having a proper inquiry. It will certainly find that some responsibility must be carried by the previous Government in terms of manpower and staffing, so there is no reason for the present Government to assume that it would be one long indictment of them. If we have to get used to the disease being endemic in the United Kingdom—if it has been in the sheep flock for a long time, that is a possibility, but I hope that blood tests will

demonstrate that it is containable—we shall have to think about how we deal with future outbreaks. My own view is that it is inconceivable that our response to another outbreak on the same scale would be the slaughter policy that we have just seen, because it would not be tolerated. A public inquiry into what went right and what went wrong, and to explore the practical alternatives, would do everyone a service.

I ask the Government for four rapid decisions concerning business. The business rate relief scheme ends this month. That means that many businesses that still have no business, no cash and no customers still need help. Government aid for the affected regions was all decided before the outbreak hit the so-called Settle-Clitheroe triangle. That means that the £2.5 million available is wholly out of proportion to the scale of the disease in our area, because it started late when decisions had already been taken. The Government aid that is given to match voluntary funding through the Countryside Agency also runs out in June, and that needs renewing. We also need some assistance with tourism, because 90 per cent. of tourists in the Yorkshire dales are from the UK. Some 80 per cent. of that 90 per cent. are regional tourists, not international tourists. I would be happy to try to reassure some of the more paranoiac American visitors that it is safe to come to the UK, but I would much rather get them in from Bradford, Barnsley—we had a sort of Barnsley chop earlier, when we heard from both halves of Barnsley—Leeds and Liverpool, because that will achieve the immediate spend that we need.

I wish to address two other issues briefly. There is a hidden industry in the countryside in Britain—the care of the elderly. We have recently discussed the issue of residential care homes and North Yorkshire has suffered particularly, because the grant system was changed and the new formula penalised us. However, a significant number of the people in care homes in North Yorkshire put themselves into care and were able to pay for it but have now run out of funding. They thus fall as a charge on the local authority but the Government do not count them in the calculation under which the local authority is funded, which is a significant problem. Proper fees must be paid if care homes are to remain in business. If they do not remain in business, all the reconfiguration of health and social services—itsself the subject of controversy in my constituency—will be handicapped, because the care in the community aspect will be very vulnerable. I hope that the Government will consider that point.

I also belong to the group of Members of Parliament concerned about the future of the House, and I ask the Government to take three issues into account, the first of which is a change in style. In the previous Session, we experienced what can be described only as a Stalinist approach to managing Government business. I hope that we will see much more flexibility in the timetabling. Secondly, I hope that the Government will act rapidly so that the Select Committees can reflect the new geometry of Whitehall to enable us to start our work as quickly as possible. I do not share the view that the sole problem with Select Committees is that their members are nominated by the Whips, because attendance is also a problem. We need to move more towards the congressional end of the congressional-parliamentary scale if Select Committees are to be effective. Finally, I agree that the Modernisation Committee should be in the hands of the House and chaired by a Back Bencher.

[Mr. David Curry]

Having the Leader of the House chairing the Committee is tantamount to making the camp commandant the chairman of the escape committee. That does not work and I hope that all hon. Members—especially those who are new to the House—will realise that we must all seek to amplify the role of the House if we are to change voters' reactions to us. Otherwise, we will fall in with a system that will end by eroding the worth of all of us.

4.35 pm

Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North): I am grateful for being called in this debate on an historic Gracious Speech. It is historic for Labour Members because it marks the first time that we have been elected for a second full term with the majority necessary to carry out our policies. I congratulate my new hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz) on his maiden speech. It was excellent and I am sure that he will make a fine parliamentarian.

This speech is like another maiden speech for me, because I spent the past four years on the Treasury Bench as a Government Whip. It feels odd up here on the Back Benches and it is certainly much higher than I remember it when I sat in a similar position on the other side of the Chamber. Instead of being restricted to moving formal motions on behalf of the Government, I am looking forward to making some less restricted interventions. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for giving me the opportunity to be part of his first Government—the first Labour Government after 18 years of the Tories—but I must admit that it was more than a tad disappointing when he broke the news to me that he did not want me in his second Administration. I guess that he was suggesting that I should spend more time with my golf clubs. However, it is no good crying about such things and there is plenty of work for Back Benchers to do.

While that lot over on the Tory Benches are busy examining their collective political navel, and no doubt disappearing into political oblivion, we have been elected to deliver better public services and to improve the lives of our people. In our first term, we undoubtedly laid sound foundations from which to go forward. We have a sound and stable economy that is unprecedented in recent times. We have made a good start on improving our health and education systems, on fighting crime and on reducing unemployment. After 18 years of the Tories, constituencies such as Doncaster, North had suffered more than most. The Tories said then that unemployment was a price worth paying. The problem was that it was not the Tories or their supporters who did the paying but people in constituencies such as mine, where thousands were thrown on to the scrap heap and left to rot on state handouts with little future and even less hope. [Interruption.]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. That is the second time that I have heard a mobile phone go off in the Chamber this afternoon. I do not know whose phone is ringing now, but I remind everyone that the Chair takes a serious view of such incidents. Members must either leave their phones outside or make sure that they are switched off.

Mr. Hughes: If it is the Prime Minister for me, can someone tell him to hold on for a moment? When I have finished he might not want me to phone him back.

When we were elected in 1997, people had great expectations, many of which were unrealistic. It was never going to be easy or possible to roll back the devastation caused by the Tories in only four or five years, but we made a good start. However, anyone who read our increasingly cynical press would think that nothing had changed—except for the worse: even the bad weather that we had last year, and the foot and mouth outbreak, were entirely the Government's fault.

I am pleased to welcome the programme set out in the Gracious Speech. I am especially pleased that there will be legislation to help more people back into work. In my constituency, unemployment has already been reduced by more than 40 per cent. by the Government, but, at almost 5 per cent., it is still far too high. We can do more.

A proposed development in Doncaster would be very helpful in getting people back to work—and into real jobs, not schemes. Just weeks before the general election, the Government decided to hold a public inquiry into the proposed development of an international airport at the former Royal Air Force base at Finningley. It is imperative for the future of employment in Doncaster and the south Yorkshire area that this development go ahead, and sooner rather than later.

There is no reason why the development should not go ahead. It does not represent a basic change of use, and the base is not a greenfield site. The project meets the Government's desire to redevelop brownfield sites and to transfer air traffic away from the south and south-east. It meets the Government's desire to regenerate coalfield areas, and to reduce road traffic. It has the support of local people and local business.

How many hon. Members know of a proposed airport about which a petition has been compiled that is in favour of it? About 80 or 90 per cent. of the population of Doncaster is in favour of the development—even in the village of Finningley, where the people who started the petition live. If the project goes ahead, it will create as many as 7,000 jobs in 15 years. They will be real jobs: mainly unskilled or semi-skilled, but probably fairly well paid. We suffered at the hands of the Tories, and the project represents a real chance for the Labour Government to step forward and start to rebuild in Doncaster and south Yorkshire.

The only real objections have come from other airports, on purely commercial grounds. Manchester airport has objected, as has Humberside airport—which is now owned by Manchester airport. East Midlands airport has also objected, although I understand that it is near to closing a deal with Manchester airport. Those airports must not be allowed to rob us of this job-creating opportunity out of pure commercial greed. Indeed, it may be time for the Competition Commission to start an inquiry into that growing consortium of northern airports, which thinks that it can dictate who can share in the wealth created by the ever-growing air traffic industry.

On education, I was pleased that the Government plan to improve standards further. We need to develop more vocational provision. All too often, youngsters who may not be able to make it in academia are left on the touchline, even though they may have superb natural skills in practical matters. We must exploit every talent, whether it is academic or vocational.

I am pleased that the Government will continue to modernise the national health service, but there must be real change on the front line. The Tories starved the NHS, and would have gone for full-scale privatisation—

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): No.

Mr. Hughes: The right hon. Gentleman knows that the Tory goal was full-scale, American-type privatisation. They still hanker after that.

Although we have made reforms and poured a great deal of extra cash into the NHS, I still have constituents who are waiting far too long for treatment, and not just for operations. Why is it that constituents have to wait more than a week—sometimes nearly two—just to get an appointment to see the general practitioner? What has happened to all the extra cash, and where is it being spent?

Local health professionals—such as the chief executives of the health authority, the healthcare trusts and the Doncaster royal infirmary trust—tell me that they are delighted with the amounts of extra cash that have been made available, but, on the front line, my constituents appear not to be able to notice the improvements.

When I was younger, my local GP practice had only two GPs, yet anyone who went to the surgery before 10 am could, after a wait of an hour or an hour and a half, see one of the GPs. Out of hours, it was possible to ring up and a GP would make a home visit. At the time, thousands of people in the area worked in heavy industry or coal mining. Many more people than now suffered injuries and the health problems inherent in working in those industries.

Today that practice has four GPs—and sometimes six. There are triage nurses, physiotherapy nurses, chiropody nurses and district nurses. There are practice managers with computers coming out of their ears. There is a contract for out-of-hours service, yet my constituents have to wait more than a week for an appointment to see a GP. That beggars belief. Why does it happen, when we have more doctors and nurses, no out-of-hours visits and better facilities and support?

I am therefore pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), is on the Front Bench to hear the debate. I hope that she will be able to answer some questions. Who is spending the money that has been made available? What are they spending it on? We must know those answers before we pour any more money into the NHS.

I am pleased that we are to continue with reform of the other place, despite media speculation that we would not. I am pleased that the intention is to remove the remaining hereditary peers, but I should not be happy about any proposal to elect even part of a new second Chamber. I believe that that would lead to even more conflict between them and us. There can be, and should be, only one democratically elected Chamber, and that is the House of Commons. If we give Members of the House of Lords a constituency, we give them a licence to oppose anything and everything that we do. We will end up in deadlock. We need a second Chamber that will act as a check and balance, not another delay mechanism in what is already a lengthy legislative process.

I am pleased, as I know that my constituents will be, that a Bill will be brought in to help the police fight crime. It is important to have in place a good and effective complaints system, and some of the Bill will be devoted to that, but it is not more complaints that we want. What we want is more police. More police mean less crime and fewer complaints. The main complaint from my constituents is about the police not responding when they need help. It is true that in some cases the police do not respond, but they cannot because there are not enough of them. My constituents do not want to hear, "Well, what can we do?"; they want to see the police around. They want the police to prevent crime, not turn up to look at an empty space where a television or video player used to be. If the police are to fulfil what we want of them, they need resources. I welcome any moves to achieve that.

It is good to see the hunting with dogs Bill in the programme. It is time to end that barbaric pursuit. Terrorising and killing animals is disgusting. People who think that it is fun are disgusting. People who think that it is a sport need psychiatric help. However, it could have waited for the next Session. It is important but, I have to say, it was not top priority on the doorsteps of my patch when I was campaigning. People want jobs, better health care, better housing, improvements in education and less crime.

I am not a big drinker, but I am disappointed that we are missing the opportunity to liberalise our archaic drinking laws. I understand that it is not an immediate priority. That said, I would rather that it were in front of the hunting Bill. Liberalisation would create more jobs. Pubs, clubs and associated industry in my area employ a considerable number of people. If we extended opening hours, it would lead to further welcome part-time employment for many people. It is ridiculous in 2001 still to be shackled to our archaic laws. People who go abroad on holiday experience more liberal laws and see their benefits. It seems silly that we are locked into archaic opening hours. We all know that extended opening would boost income, particularly in our tourist areas. Publicans in whatever area would soon find a timetable to suit their particular business. If I am lucky in the private Member's ballot, I might seek to introduce such a Bill.

I should have liked there to have been something on devolution to the English regions. The Government remain committed to devolution in Scotland and Wales, and that is fine, but let us get decision making closer to the people of the English regions, too.

There is much more in the Gracious Speech to be pleased with. I only hope that we are not again taking on more than it is feasible to get through the system with proper democratic scrutiny. The legislation that we passed in the second half of the last Parliament is not yet being felt on the ground. The message on the doorsteps of Doncaster, North was abundantly clear; yes, we have done well in only four years; yes, we have laid decent foundations; but go back and show what can be done with the full second term.

I do not want to see battles with public sector workers for the sake of making us look tough. If there is to be private sector involvement in our public services, it must be only where appropriate and where it can bring added value. The idea that everything that the private sector does is good and everything that the public sector does is bad is stupid. The balance must be absolutely right because if it is not, our supporters will not forgive us. We do not

[Mr. Hughes]

want any Railtracks in education or in our health service. There must be no imposition along those lines. Ministers must talk to those who work in our public services, and seek their knowledge on how the services should be run and how to improve them. Ministers must carry public servants with them and then they will carry the public with them, too. Ignore public servants at our peril; carry them and we will end up with much improved public services.

4.54 pm

Annette Brooke (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate.

First, I thank the people of the Mid-Dorset and North Poole constituency for electing me as their Member of Parliament. It is a great honour to represent them and I promise to do my best in serving them.

Mid-Dorset and North Poole was a new constituency, created in 1997. Hence, my predecessor, Christopher Fraser, was its first Member of Parliament. I pay tribute to his diligent and conscientious work for his constituents. Here, his parliamentary career progressed within a relatively short time. He was appointed Private Parliamentary Secretary to Lord Strathclyde. I recall it being reported in our local press that Christopher was voted the best dressed MP. I fear that I cannot aspire to his never-failing extremely smart appearance.

It is traditional to spend a little time describing one's constituency. That will give me particular pleasure, as mine has one minor defect: its name, which presents problems to media commentators and local residents, and certainly does not give a real sense of place. It is located in a beautiful part of the country and I am proud to live in such a special area, which is made up of many different individual communities, both urban and rural. The constituency was created from parts of four other Dorset constituencies and local services are provided by four principal councils.

About two thirds of the electorate live in the borough of Poole. This part of Poole includes more recent development, but there is great pride among local residents in belonging to the ancient borough of Poole. Four years ago, I had the great honour of being the 749th mayor of Poole. I am sad to say that I was only the 10th lady mayor in that long history.

In North Poole, we have a great source of employment, which includes the head office of Dorset chamber of commerce and industry. We have many important small and large businesses covering engineering, electronics and computer-based industries, and recently the manufacture of Poole pottery has been relocated into the constituency.

We have internationally significant heath land and outstanding recreational facilities. As we move across to the west of the constituency, and from many parts of North Poole, we have many glimpses of the famous Poole harbour, and as we go into the rural part of the constituency, which is the largest part in area, there is also a beautiful forest. We pass through villages, and when we get to the far west we reach Bere Regis and Wareham. Wareham is a beautiful Saxon walled market town and it, like Poole, was very important in trading. Perhaps some

hon. Members have experienced a very pleasant boat trip from Poole quay to Wareham, where one can get excellent fish and chips.

I have deliberately referred to Poole harbour because my constituents would not forgive me if I did not mention the need for a second Poole bridge. I am sure that I will co-operate with the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) in making sure that that is firmly on the Government's agenda.

As I have described, my constituency is made up of many diverse communities, but their interdependence and complementary nature underline many of the challenges facing the Government in terms of urban and rural policy making. The whole of my constituency is indeed greater than its parts. I wish to put Mid-Dorset and North Poole firmly in decision makers' minds.

Across the diverse communities in my constituency there is a common issue: the need for better public services. I welcome the priority given to these in the Queen's Speech. My concern is whether the detailed proposals will deliver improvements, as clearly demanded and deserved by the public.

I shall speak on one public service today—education—as it is an area in which I have direct experience as a former chair of education. Yesterday, I was aware of comments floating in the direction of the Liberal Democrat Benches that it is not simply a matter of money. Most of us would agree that we cannot improve public services just by throwing money at the problems. I would like to stop today to think about the consequences of a lack of money.

The local education authorities in my constituency—Dorset and Poole—receive considerably less funding than those in other parts of the country. In fact, for this financial year, it works out that they have together received 10 per cent. less than the average standard spending assessment in England. Nobody would expect identical allocations across the country, but we have a right to expect to understand the differentials, so that we have a fair, open and transparent system.

Parents and teachers in my constituency find it difficult to understand why schools in Poole receive on average £274 per pupil less than those in other constituencies. That seems largely to come down to the problem of the area cost adjustment. I am aware that that has been raised many, many times. It was never addressed properly by the Conservative Government and the deferring of the day of sorting out such problems seems to go on and on. Meanwhile, our children are losing out, and for all time.

On the face of it, the consequences of that lack of money in my constituency are not apparent because we achieve excellent results. However, that is due to the commitment and excellence of our teachers and the commitment of our parents. In many parts of the constituency, there have been financial improvements in schools owing to parents' commitment to providing extra funds.

However, I described my constituency as diverse, and it is. There are parts where there is extreme poverty. It is very difficult to be sure that children are receiving the education that they deserve when it is not possible for parents to put in extra money or secure sponsorship from firms and local industry. I am concerned about every child in my constituency and I would like to think that every child matters. I really want to know when those issues will be addressed.

In 1997, Dorset returned eight male Conservative Members of Parliament. In 2001, there are six Conservative Members, one Labour Member and one Liberal Democrat—seven male and one female. Over the next few years, I hope that I will be able to demonstrate that that is an improvement in representation in more ways than one.

5.2 pm

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke) on her maiden speech. She mentioned that her predecessor was voted the best dressed MP—I appreciate that that is not something to which I could ever aspire—but when she first came into the Chamber her vivid red clothes reminded me terribly of the Blair babes, as they were known. Perhaps my eyes are going. I am sure that she is immensely proud to represent a beautiful part of Thomas Hardy country. Her constituency is an excellent part of our national heritage.

I am very sad that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills is not in the House so that I could press her further on the proposals that she may or may not have for privatising parts of our education service. I hope that her colleagues on the Government Front Bench will relay my felicitations and congratulations not only on her very good speech but on her well deserved promotion to the sunny uplands of the Cabinet. I say without fear of contradiction that she is one person who very much deserved her promotion. Long may she be in that role and successful at it.

The Gracious Speech began with the assertion that economic stability and reform in public services will lead to

"a more prosperous and inclusive society."

I am afraid that I must beg to differ slightly with that. Those two areas of government are very important to achieving such objectives, but many other matters must be addressed if, in the name of social justice, all our citizens are to be included and are to share in the desired prosperity.

Many of the measures set out in the Gracious Speech are certainly to be welcomed. It would be churlish not to mention them, but they relate to a particular view of government. I remember when the flavour of the month in my party was communitarianism. I did not take a great deal of notice of the half-baked ideas of Amitai Etzioni when such views were fashionable. When the third way came on to the scene, I did not lend my name to it. Indeed, I did not lend my name to the third way, the fourth way or the fifth way. Nobody could ever explain the third way to me and I never understood what they were going on about anyway. It seemed, in part at least, to represent a more technocratic and managerial view of what government can achieve—a view that is very well reflected in the Gracious Speech.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday, the Gracious Speech did not contain the sum total of measures that will be considered by the House during the Session. Many other items might arise that were not set out in the Gracious Speech; indeed, I hope that that happens. The Speech contained a list of the Government's priorities. Presumably, they were set out at least in part to reconnect with the many millions of people who turned their backs on electoral politics last month.

That is one theory behind the delivery argument that has repeatedly been advanced in recent weeks. I think that we must at some point explain what exactly we mean by delivery. There is certainly a high expectation of all forms of delivery in education, health, crime reduction and transport. I take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham): our yardstick must be what happens in our constituencies. Many good things have happened during the Government's period in office. For example, with regard to education in my constituency, I cannot cavil at the amount of capital investment that has gone into our schools, although there is still a long way to go and many have missed out. That is partly due to the ineptitude of a local Lib Dem council that cannot get its act together, but many problems have also arisen because of a basic shortage of available funding. Although plenty is available, it is not enough to meet the huge backlog that built up over the years.

On health, the circumstances are similar. Investments have been made in our local health provision, but horror stories are still coming out of local hospitals in particular. We still need to address the problem that was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes), who pointed out that, despite increased resources, the service outcome often seems to get worse. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will want to consider the matter in terms of delegation or devolution of powers to a regional level. Who knows? Improvements might be made even lower down the supply chain and at the coal face, where it really counts.

The achievement of the promises that have been made on delivery in those many areas will rest on the Government's actions during the next 18 months or so. I refer to 18 months because of the long lead-in time of so many of our commitments. For example, we have a commitment to increase the number of teachers, but we need to recognise—we did not seem to do so before—that it will take a long time for the required number of teachers to train and qualify. Do we have the capacity to meet demand within the period in which people expect it to be met? It is no use talking to the electorate about a 10-year plan. They will think about what happens between now and the next election.

The commitment to produce another 10,000 or so doctors is similar. Does not it take six or seven years to train a doctor? People will expect a positive service outcome way before the first cohorts have completed their training. I accept that many have already started, but do we have the capacity to train the numbers? There is often a mismatch between presentation and the expectation that is out there.

It may seem ridiculous at such an early stage to look four years ahead, but people know how quickly the electoral cycle ends. People also understand that events in the early days of a Parliament determine what happens at its end. I like to look ahead. At the next general election, there is no way that we, the governing party, can offer excuses to the electorate, given our firm commitments on delivery. It is therefore essential to move quickly to effect the necessary changes to meet expectations.

It is not impossible to achieve that, but it does not require a technocratic view of government; it demands a political vision. I hope that we shall see signs of that shortly. When Clem Attlee became Prime Minister of a bankrupt country, he was able to effect his vision of the

[Mr. Peter Kilfoyle]

British polity in one Parliament. It did not take him four years to put in building blocks; he implemented his vision in times of great adversity. We face such urgency, at least in electoral terms, today.

I am worried about the omissions from the Gracious Speech and the expectations of people who have hitherto been Labour voters. We must all take note of what happened in the last general election. Much nonsense has been talked about it. Once the academics get into the number crunching, they will confirm what sensible observers have already divined. There was great apathy and some complacency. Some people also took the attitude of, "A plague on all your houses; you do not relate to my life." That should worry everyone in politics; several hon. Members have already said that. We must take the matter seriously because people's attitudes are linked to what the Government provide. In that context, the omissions from the Gracious Speech are especially stark.

Some of my hon. Friends have spoken about local government, which remains an important delivery mechanism, not only for central Government services but for those that directly affect the quality of life. Housing remains a major issue for people. However, the proposed changes to housing legislation deal only with those who buy and sell houses, and not with the rented sector. They should, because the rented sector is a matter of grave concern.

Like many constituencies, mine has a mix of owner-occupied, privately rented, council rented and housing association properties. Often, meaningful planning is obstructed when attempts are made to tackle serious housing problems. There is a matrix, one part of which tends to act against the other when we try to achieve something meaningful. The Gracious Speech does not tackle that.

Local councils cover poorly lit streets and potholes in the street, which are obvious manifestations of poor government in many people's eyes. Many of the more esoteric subjects with which we get carried away do not matter an iota to someone who has a leaking roof, a huge pothole in the road outside that no one will fix, or goes home down a street with broken lighting. Local authorities can and should provide the services that matter most.

However, local authorities of all political hues are over a barrel because of our terrible centralising tendency. That has happened under a Labour Government and under previous Governments. It has been growing for a long time; it is almost as if we do not trust people to get on with their lives. We have not done so for the best part of 20 or 25 years. That detracts from the democratic process and people's involvement. It also constitutes a failure to deliver what we claim we are here to provide: a tangible improvement in people's everyday lives. We simply do not do it. For me, that accounts for a major part of the disaffection felt by a large part of the electorate towards politicians of all parties at the election.

To go back to the idea of delivering on our public services, I wonder about the time frame in which expectations are set, as opposed to the time frame in which delivery can take place; for example, in the training of personnel. I also wonder what will happen to the financial settlement after 2003. It seems as though we

shall come to a great unknown at that point. How are we going to finance the public services in a meaningful way after that date? The Government will need to be able to convince us that they can continue what appears to be a very ambitious programme for public services, and we shall need to know, quite frankly, where the money will come from.

Other issues that I would have liked to be included in the Gracious Speech have been ignored. There is nothing about the review that is needed of the financial settlement between the countries and regions of the United Kingdom. I shall not repeat what my hon. Friends have said about the unequal funding of the different parts of the United Kingdom.

In the north, we feel disadvantaged by the Barnett formula, which certainly favours Scotland and Wales. We also feel disadvantaged by an area cost adjustment that, for years, has taken money away from local government and put it into the south-east. That is all done for very sensible reasons, but the net result has been a disparity in funding between some regions of the United Kingdom and others, which cannot be justified. It seems as though the time is right to review that situation. There might be a case to be made for some of those disparities, but I cannot recollect when the last review took place.

Mr. Simon Thomas: May I associate myself with the hon. Gentleman's comments about the need for a review of the Barnett formula? The last review took place when the formula was established in 1979 as a pro tem measure, but it has continued for more than 20 years. Does he agree, however, that if we are to review the formula, we should do so using a needs-based analysis of all the regions of England, Wales and Scotland? That might undermine his case that Wales is over-funded, but it could do a lot of good for the regions of England as well.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I do not claim to be an expert on finance in Wales, or, indeed, in England, Scotland or anywhere else. However, I know that different amounts of money go to different parts of the country. I accept that any resolution of that inequity must be carried out on the basis of need. As I understand it, the Barnett formula was originally introduced to dampen down the cries for devolution. It was, in a sense, a way of trying to buy people off. That does not strike me as a sensible way of achieving a financial settlement that pays due attention to the needs of all the people in the whole of the United Kingdom.

There are deeper issues to be considered at some point by the Government. Perhaps they are not issues on which we can legislate, but some concerns could certainly be addressed either administratively or in the extra legislation that might magically appear, to which the Prime Minister alluded in the House yesterday. One such issue is the widening economic gap between still depressed parts of the country and other parts which—fair play to them—seem to be doing rather well.

We experience on a day-to-day basis—I am sure that other hon. Members will have had similar experiences—businesses uprooting and moving to a different part of the country. They do not even go abroad, just to another part of this country, and they are using grants provided by the Government. The problem is therefore rotated from place to place. Jobs are created in one area at the expense of

jobs in another. That cannot be right. Furthermore, it cannot be right that more and more Members of this House, and other commentators, are talking about how to cater for the shortage of labour in the south-east while there are still problematic areas in the north-west and other similar regions.

At a recent meeting, I pointed out that in the north Liverpool poverty cluster—that is not my definition; it is from the London school of economics—there are 269,000 people. There is a crux area of six wards—my constituency. Four of those are among the poorest 12 wards in the United Kingdom. There is a concentration of poverty there that needs to be addressed, but, to be absolutely frank, the local council cannot and will not handle it. That is true not only of the Lib Dems, who are in now, but of the previous council, which could not get to grips with the enormity and complexity of the problems. That concentration of poverty needs to be addressed by significant Government intervention, which is as true of poverty clusters in Manchester, Leeds and central London as of those anywhere else. I look forward to that action.

I also feel strongly about an issue that might seem a little contentious: the idea that we can do nothing to address the widening gap between the individual rich and the individual poor is anathema to me. Some people say, "Well, that's the enterprise society." I see nothing enterprising in people getting a bigger and bigger share of the economic cake at the expense—there is no way to cloak this—of those at the bottom of the heap.

I also looked for a proposal that might enable me to feel more comfortable about the way in which employees in this country, in a variety of ways, still do not have the same conditions affecting their working life as employees in our partner countries in Europe. I still hope that, somewhere along the way, we will be able to consider those issues during this Parliament.

I referred to jobs that move within the country, and we all know that an announcement was made recently about consultation. That is one issue, and I understand that the Government have resolved it in respect of firms consulting with their employees before they up and move somewhere else. Many firms up and move to Europe and it remains a fact that it is easier to get rid of an employee in this country than in Europe.

When push comes to shove, global corporations undertake global reviews—for example, that announced by Glaxo last week, under which 700 jobs in Liverpool went. Jobs go because companies say that they have undertaken a global review, but that hides a multitude of sins. There may be sound economic reasons within that company to rationalise in such a way, but it is undeniable that one consideration in such a rationalisation is that it is far, far easier for it to get rid of employees in the UK than elsewhere in Europe.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and, as ever, I am following his penetrating analysis. Does he accept that there might just be a relationship between the happily low unemployment enjoyed by this country, which is comparable to that in the United States, and the Government's boast that inward investment is at a sustained level and that capitalists are voting with their money and coming here? Compare that with the situation

in continental Europe, which receives very little of the flow of inward investment and where unemployment is much higher.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I accept that there is a relationship and I give the Government credit for the way in which they have sustained that inward investment, but there is always a cost. My priority has to be the constituency that I represent. We are on the outer rim, where people are the last to feel the benefit and the first to feel the pain. That is my point.

I am sure that the Government are inventive enough to address the issue, but unless we can find ways to equalise the playing field for companies that have taken the plunge and put the investment in—many do, let us be fair—people in the peripheral parts of the United Kingdom will always be the first to lose out. I hope that the Government will address those matters.

I want the Government to succeed and I look forward to them being returned at the next election, which is four years off. I would love Labour to get an equally huge majority—I make no bones about that. I do not worry about the democratic arguments in the way that Opposition Members may do. As far as I am concerned, if a party is given a mandate by the people, it should take it and do whatever needs to be done.

However, I do not believe that it will be quite so straightforward, as we approach the next election, to argue the case on delivery of public services unless we take the necessary and appropriate action now. I echo what my hon. Friends have said about this: it is not a case of simply having a knee-jerk reaction against public ownership or control and privatising everything. I take a pragmatic view and believe that some things need to be privatised. However, the idea that privatisation is always better is palpable nonsense. If we look to privatisation to cure one ill, it mystifies me why the logical corollary is not that we should take into public ownership something on which the private sector has failed, such as Railtrack. I cannot see how one possibility can be excluded while we embrace the other side of the argument. It does not make the pragmatic economic sense to which the Government aspire.

My biggest concern is that we re-engage as many people as possible in our political life. To do that, we must keep faith with them and deliver on our promises. I am sure that the Government will make every effort to do so, but the harsh reality is that they do not have a great deal of time. What is done over these first 18 months or so will determine the outcome down the line. I worry that if we are to get reciprocity from those who have lent their support hitherto, albeit in diminishing numbers out of the overall electorate, we must be able to deliver at the next election. That requires a more than technocratic approach to government in the coming months.

5.26 pm

David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle), who is an old friend and always forthright in his comments. I was glad to hear that he rejects the third way; he will appreciate that I have more trouble with the fourth way in my normal practices.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke) on her gracious maiden speech. Winston Churchill once stood up

[David Davis]

in this House after a maiden speech and said that it was no maiden; it was a brazen hussy of a speech. That was not true of the hon. Lady's speech, which was delicate, well put and generous. She gave great credit to her predecessor, which reflects well on her.

Before I comment on the main thrust of the Queen's Speech, I should like to make a couple of comments. First, I congratulate the new Secretary of State for Education and Skills. She was a stellar performer as a junior Minister and she deserves her appointment to the Cabinet. Secondly, I thank the Secretary of State for Health for including in the Queen's Speech the Adoption and Children Bill. It started in the last Parliament with a lot of all-party support and the right hon. Gentleman knows my interest in it. It has some way to go in this Parliament.

May I make a plea to the right hon. Gentleman? We are undertaking a complex piece of social legislation. One of the great problems with bipartisan legislation is that it rarely gets the scrutiny that it deserves and it then goes wrong. We have a piece of legislation that could dramatically affect the lives of more than 50,000 children. I urge the Government to give the Bill all the time that it needs to receive proper scrutiny, perhaps continuing the Special Committee stage that was started in the last Parliament. That is the only way to ensure that that eminently sensible and worthwhile Bill gets on to the statute book in proper form and does the duty that it sets out to do.

I shall now adopt a slightly less conciliatory tone. The Government are without doubt the most powerful in half a century. That is not a compliment. During the last Parliament, they used their power to undermine the rights of Parliament and to diminish their own accountability. Those points have been raised by others already today. Nothing in the Queen's Speech, nor in what the Leader of the House or the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) said earlier today, indicates that anything will be different in this Parliament.

Like my right hon. Friends the Members for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), who have spoken already, I am a member of Parliament First, a group founded by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) and consisting of Members of all parties of the House, and I am dedicated to reinstating the power of the House. Most particularly, I am committed to implementing the recommendations of the Select Committee on Liaison to enforce the effectiveness of this Chamber and the Select Committee system. We shall use every opportunity throughout this Parliament to advance that cause.

The fact that the Government are very powerful has another implication, which was touched on by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton. Throughout the previous Parliament, the Government blamed their predecessors for everything that went wrong, and claimed the credit for everything that went right. That is about to come to an end because those days are over. The Government have the power and the money, and they have already had plenty of time to deliver on their promises. They are running out of excuses. Indeed, they will be going into an excuse-free zone for the next four years. From now on, they will have to account for their failures—and there will be failures.

Although I believe that the Government have heard the expressions of irritation, anger and disappointment from constituents up and down the country, they do not understand how to respond. They have taxed more, spent more and interfered more. They still believe that by spending more, services will automatically improve and that bigger government is better government.

The increases in spending that were introduced in the Budget that preceded the general election will be unaffordable unless taxes rise substantially in the latter half of this Parliament. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton identified that problem in his usual forthright way.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: The right hon. Gentleman referred to spending increases. May I take him back to the election campaign and ask him whether the brief contribution of the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), before he went into hiding, was helpful or unhelpful to his party's campaign?

David Davis: I shall pick up on that point in a few moments because I want to explain to the House what I think about the relationship between expenditure and taxation. Before that intervention, I was making the point that the Government may be concerned about these tax changes only if they have an electoral cost. The real cost to Britain is more important than that.

A rising burden of taxation will ultimately undermine our ability to invest in public services. Low taxes and high-quality public services are not mutually exclusive; they are essential partners. The logic is straightforward enough, and has been proven in this country before. Low tax rates lead to higher economic growth rates. High growth rates lead to higher tax takes—any Treasury Minister knows that. Higher tax takes give the opportunity of public service increases and subsequent tax cuts. That was the story and the lesson of the 1980s, and it is a lesson that we should understand today.

I predict trouble ahead for the Government. Judging by the new-found tone of humility, I think that they also fear trouble. Simply pouring resources into public services will not, in itself, deliver real improvement, any more than it did in the last Parliament. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton also touched on that point effectively, although not so explicitly.

The problem with our public services is not just under-investment, although that is a major issue in many areas. Their structures and organisations are incapable of delivering the quality of service that an increasingly demanding society requires—the very point about GPs not being able to meet the demands put on them.

When the Secretary of State for Education and Skills opened the debate, she talked about the transformation of public services. The so-called transformation proposed in the Queen's Speech has little chance of doing the job. In no area is that so true as it is in health. We should consider just a few of the country's problems. Every year, 5,000 patients die from infections that they did not have when they went into hospital. That costs the health service £1 billion a year. It is not a question of increases in expenditure: that swallows expenditure.

Comparisons with our European neighbours show that tens of thousands of people in this country die unnecessarily of cancer, strokes or cardiac disease. Tens of thousands more die of medical mistakes, which is an

issue that the Secretary of State and I have discussed. More than 2 million bed days are lost each year because of delays in the discharging of older people to carers. More than 1,000 operations a week are cancelled on the day of admission. Despite massive interventions—through targets that distort clinical priorities and reduce the quality of service—nearly 1.5 million people remain on waiting lists, and the new suspended lists have grown.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire cited the case of a cancer patient who had been in touch with him and who was on a waiting list for radiotherapy. Only four or five weeks ago I encountered a similar case, although this person was suffering from throat cancer rather than breast cancer. It had taken a year for him to be diagnosed, owing to a combination of mistakes and delays in being able to see a specialist—a story that we have heard time and again. As a result, after the operation it was found that the cancer had spread, and the patient needed radiotherapy. Like my right hon. Friend's constituent, he had to wait three months for that. I do not know how other Members feel, but I would find that a terrifying experience.

There cannot be a Member who has been here for the past four years who has not encountered such a case. That person was by no means the first of my constituents to describe circumstances in which terrifying waits or problems had been experienced or, alternatively, life savings had been spent on escaping a life of pain by opting for private treatment—sometimes in other countries.

The truth is that Britain, the world's fourth largest economy, is delivering health care whose quality is lower than that provided by most of our European partners. It is far lower than that in the United States, and it is lower than that in many countries that are much less wealthy than ours. The Government's solution is to increase public spending at a rate that will require higher taxes in future. Their increases in health spending cannot match those of our partners, or keep pace with rising demand; nor can an NHS structure designed more than half a century ago make the best use of the additional resources that both political parties have promised the health service for two decades.

This is the reality of the national health service. It is failing patients, and its centralised bureaucracy is delivering worse care than most of its equivalents abroad. The national health service reform Bill appears to recognise the problem of centralisation and bureaucracy—I will give the Secretary of State that—but its solutions are inadequate. They will create yet more futile reorganisation, which NHS workers must view with little enthusiasm.

We must think again. The NHS needs radical surgery. Advances in technology will undoubtedly make much more individually tailored health care available, but the worst possible organisation to deliver individually tailored health care is a centralised state bureaucracy. We should be making the state the guarantor of the free availability and quality of health care, rather than its primary provider. That is the key issue in this debate. We should be looking at the possibility of giving each patient an explicit choice of health care, as well as harnessing the effectiveness of the private sector in a more transparent way. Radical solutions do not necessarily mean privatising the NHS; what they mean is that we should personalise the service,

making it responsive to patients and their GPs rather than to the central bureaucracy and the central plan of the Secretary of State. There is a similar story in our schools.

Geraint Davies: Many of the statistics that the right hon. Gentleman has rightly quoted come from the Public Accounts Committee. Does he accept that many of the Committee's recommendations have already been embraced by the Government in their national health plan? Does he also accept that his final suggestion that we should lift responsibility from the state in some way was never one of the PAC's recommendations, and that he was making a political point?

David Davis: Of course, that is correct. That is the first time that I have ever been criticised for making a political point in the House of Commons, but let me answer the hon. Gentleman's question in the spirit in which it was asked. He is right. Indeed, as *The Guardian* rather tediously reminded people yesterday, the Government have carried out some 950 of the Committee's recommendations, but let me give one example of the sort of problem that arises from the centralised approach.

We criticised the cancellation of operations on the day of admission; the hon. Gentleman will remember the case. I commend the Secretary of State for Health for including in his NHS plan a requirement—a target—for the health authorities: there were to be no more than a certain number of cancellations on the day of admission. What did we see barely a month or two ago? The first health authority moved cancellations to the day before admission. That is not the way to run the health service. Regional organisations are distorting the intent in order to meet the new rules. That is the problem. As I have said throughout, the mechanism used was well intentioned—I have no argument whatever with the intention of the ministerial team—but the problem of running the service centrally is that we always run into difficulties, with regional organisations trying to meet the rules to the disadvantage sometimes of patients. We had a clear-cut example of that.

If we believe the Department for Education and Skills, everything is getting better in our schools. The truth is a little different. The currency of the qualifications is being debased. A-level standards have fallen by a full grade since the Government came to power. That point was raised by Durham university when the A-level results were published last August.

Let us look outside the Department for a more empirical and reliable external measure. International surveys show that standards in mathematics and science have not moved in the past five years when measured against those of our international competitors, so standards are stagnating rather than rising, and in any case are far too low. The worst standards—I come back to a point made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton—are in the areas of highest deprivation.

It is a tragedy that this country—it is an issue not just for this Government, but for Governments in the next half a century at least—has let down the weakest pupils in education for as long as I can remember. I have forgotten which hon. Member on the Government Benches mentioned the failure of the secondary modern system, part of the system whereby we had grammar schools and secondary moderns. They failed because they did not

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carry through the social experiment drawn up during the second world war. We have never done a good job for the weakest pupils in Britain, and it is about time that we set about that properly.

The starting point for a fundamental reassessment of schools policy—in this area, I have some overlap with the Government—must be more robust use of testing, something that we fought for in government against opposition from Labour, although Labour has now adopted it. That is fine; I am always happy to welcome a prodigal son. If more parental choice in education is to be meaningful, it must be accompanied by clear information about the performance of schools. We need a proper standardisation of exams and new measurement of children's abilities on entering and leaving school. Crude league tables are no longer enough—they were a start; they raised the public's attention; and they raised interest in and focused political attention on school performance, but now they are no longer good enough. Our method of assessing relative school performance needs to be far more sophisticated.

The Secretary of State promised value-added measures by 2002. I welcome that. I hope that that means a complete set of measures being published by 2002, rather than the start of a five or seven-year programme to get them five or seven years thereafter. Nevertheless, the devil is in the detail. Standardised measures must be formulated properly and not biased by social or economic adjustments or by the judgments of local education authority officials. They must be formulated on the basis of an absolute standard.

The Secretary of State made a very good point about the problem of education in weaker schools. Expectations in weak schools are too low. One way of galvanising expectations would be to test and compare schools in a manner that is fair to all schools. I would be demoralised if I worked in a school in a poor area where new pupils had not been given a very good education and we were being compared with schools in middle-class or better areas. However, if I worked in such a school and knew that I would be compared fairly, I would be motivated to deliver the best possible outcome for those youngsters. Therefore, value-added testing is important not only as a means of measuring schools but as a means of motivating teachers.

We need more choice and a more diverse system, and we are being promised such a system, but it is ironic that it was this Government who declared war on grant-maintained schools, assisted places and grammar schools. As I said, however, we welcome the prodigal's return. Nevertheless, such changes alone will not be sufficient, and good schools should be allowed to expand freely. Still, we must worry about what happens at the other end of the scale.

We have to worry about how to rescue children from the worst schools when those schools are declining. Schools are not like shops, and children cannot simply move from one school to another, but tend to sign up to a school for five to seven years. We have to find a way of dealing robustly with failure. It is not a matter simply of sending in a few high-profile hit squads, accompanied by television cameras, or of martyring a few harassed superheads, let alone of posturing at a few National Union of Teachers conferences. The Government will have to

confront one of the toughest issues of all—whether to allow the very worst schools to continue at all in their current form, or to take much more direct action than they are currently planning.

Policing is another social service. However, the Government have not been tough either on crime or on the causes of crime. They have simply been tough on individual freedoms and on our police forces. Between 1997 and the end of last year, police numbers had decreased by almost 3,000. Between March 1999 and 2000, crime increased for the first time in seven years. Our police are now too overworked to fight today's crime.

Compared with the situation of 30 years ago, a typical police officer now has annually to deal with double the number of crimes. Simply to return to the police officer to crime ratio that prevailed in the 1980s, we would need more than 30,000 more police officers and probably twice the number of special constables. Such an increase would be affordable over time, and the practical effects of such an increase would be rapid. Regrettably, however—as the previous Home Secretary knows only too well—funding for more police has not been one of the Chancellor's priorities.

The police reform Bill will bring some improvements in police complaints procedures and some helpful changes in how forces are run. However, the measure will do very little to make inroads into rising crime levels. It will not deal with the problems that prevent police from meeting the wishes of their local populations.

There is a resource issue to be addressed. The most important measure to deliver real crime reduction would be a dramatic increase in police numbers. That has been the experience of New York, which is now a safer city than London and has about one and a half times as many police. The Government, however, have taken a different course. They have cheap-skated our police forces and tried to make up for that with increasingly draconian changes to the law. An auction of our liberties has been accompanied by decreasing police numbers.

In the previous Parliament, the Government took the right to remove passports on suspicion and attempted to end some people's right to trial by jury. That attempt was defeated in the Lords last time and we hope that the new attempt will suffer a similar fate.

We all want to catch and punish the guilty, but we will not do that by eroding the rights of the innocent. This police state without the police undermines the fundamental British principles of liberty and justice and is wholly ineffective as a means of stopping crime. It is simply the wrong approach.

It is time to break the back of the idea that things will always get better if only we spend a little more. That is worse than just an illusion: it is a dogma that has beset Britain for too long and is directly responsible for the growing disillusionment with our entire political process referred to by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton.

People know that things are not getting better. Every day, patients endure unnecessary suffering, indignity and death because of the failure of our health service. Every day, children have their prospects and ambitions destroyed because the Government have not been resolute in tackling failure in schools. Every day, everyone pays the cost of record levels of crime, because we have not faced up to the need to police our streets.

Those whom we are letting down now are not the strong or the able: they are the weakest and the poorest, those without choice and without opportunity. They are part of the lost generation of voters for all parties. They are the people whom our political system, and the House, no longer offers any credible hope. We have all been imprisoned by a system that drives serious debate out of politics. It is time we were brave enough to be radical.

5.52 pm

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe): I want to reflect on the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes) about how strange it is to make a speech again after four years of enforced silence in the Whips Office. This is my first speech from this side of the Chamber. Four years is a quite a long time. Perhaps after the next 10 or 15 minutes, cries of "Four more years!" will ring round the Chamber. I spent a happy four years in the Whips Office, if the idea of a happy Whip is not too hard a concept for hon. Members to contemplate.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to talk about the improvements in our public services—the issue that ordinary electors raised with me on the doorstep during the general election campaign. They were concerned about health, education, crime and transport, among other issues.

Without a strong economy, the debate about improving public services would be irrelevant. The fact that we created 1 million more jobs, with more people paying tax and fewer on benefit, has brought about sound public finances. We know what to do with those sound public finances: we will use them to improve our public services, which is what the public voted for. That contrasts with the official Opposition, who would have frittered away the benefits of that strong economy on tax cuts, which the electorate rejected, and with the Liberal Democrats, who would have frittered away the strong economy with a splurge of public expenditure increases that neither they nor anyone else has any idea how to fund. They called for more nurses, doctors and teachers; more for pensioners and for farmers; the abolition of student fees; and free long-term care for the elderly. A penny on income tax would never have funded all that, and in the end the electorate were not fooled.

Dr. Evan Harris: I am delighted to respond to the hon. Gentleman's litany of our excellent pledges. He must recognise that not all of them were to be funded by the 1p on income tax, which was for education. He is clearly against our proposal of 10p on the top rate of income tax for those earning more than £100,000—it is too redistributive for him—which was the fair way of funding our promises on pensions and the health service.

Mr. Betts: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, but I still do not think that his sums add up, and he failed to mention the fact that the Liberal Democrats supported the new deal but voted against the tax increases to fund it. That is another hole in their finances.

Education has rightly been given great priority; I, too, accord it and specialist schools importance. I am in favour of such schools, which have been of great benefit to the children who attend them. Indeed, I am bound to say so

because the Secretary of State for Education and Skills has written to me today, announcing not one but two new specialist schools in my constituency: Birley community college and Hansworth Grange school. I welcome those measures; both schools deserve those awards.

There is concern, however, not about the creation of specialist schools or the fact that they disadvantage other schools, but about parents' perception: parents considering sending their children to other schools may think that they are somehow inferior. That is certainly not true in the case of adjacent schools in my constituency, but parents' perception may be a danger. Ministers ought to consider how they will tackle that, along with other schools. The school adjacent to Birley community college in my constituency is Westfield school, which is in no way inferior but, unfortunately, has inferior school buildings.

I therefore support strongly the Government's building programme in education. In Sheffield, there has been an increase from the 1996 allocation of between £1 million and £2 million a year for capital programmes in education to more than £100 million, which is currently being spent on building works in schools throughout the city. In my constituency, schools have been built through the private finance initiative; some have been built through the new deal and some through mainstream funding. Pupils, school governors and staff are not worried how schools are built or how financing is secured; they are just grateful that they have new schools, which would not have been provided by the Opposition. My plea is certainly for more school building programmes; we should carry on the good work. I hope that Westfield school is near the top of Ministers' priorities, as its buildings are poor and have been deteriorating for many years. A working party has been set up between the Department for Education and Skills and Sheffield city council officials to look at school assets, so I hope that a new asset plan will bring help to that area.

I wish to sound a cautionary note about pre-school education. One of the best things that we did in the previous Parliament was to provide universal pre-school education for four-year-olds. Getting to children early, particularly those from disadvantaged homes, is very important indeed. I welcome the commitment to get universal provision down to the age of three.

Passing legislation in this place does guarantee delivery outside. I have a particular problem in my constituency, as it took me several months to get recognition of the fact that a local authority was not delivering universal provision for four-year-olds. In the Charnock area of my constituency, not every four-year-old has the right to a nursery place because the local authority plan remains defective. Eventually, after badgering and support from the Minister who then had responsibility for pre-school education, the authority recognised the issue and started to address it by getting in a private sector provider. I am all in favour of that, as is the local primary school. There is no dissension at all about private enterprise coming in to fill a gap in public service provision.

The problem is that, after months of wrangling between education officials and local planners—and now the local authority's property services people are trying to take their share by charging an extortionate amount for the land in question, which is in the green belt—we are still no further forward with nursery provision. Passing

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legislation in Parliament does not guarantee provision on the ground. I urge Ministers to be more rigorous in following through in future when such gaps arise, and making sure that local authorities deliver in an extremely important service area.

I support the proposals on crime in the Queen's Speech and give full backing to the tougher measures outlined to deal with it. I certainly welcome the commitment to additional police officers, for which my constituents regularly ask. Again, I shall raise one issue that, I hope, the Home Secretary will address. One of the most common problems that people raise in my surgery and at public meetings is anti-social behaviour on our estates, which is a genuine problem for many whose lives are blighted by the activities of a minority who have no idea what they are doing to the rest of the community—or perhaps they do and just do not care. The idea of the anti-social behaviour orders was a good one. It is right in principle and I am pleased that housing and local authority officials and the police are now working more closely together. The idea of giving responsibility for community safety to local authorities was a good one. Initially, there was much criticism that the orders were not being used—I was equally critical—but the more I hear from local authority officials and the police the more I realise that what was a good idea is difficult to put into practice, because of the way in which the orders were established. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has the same problems in his constituency, because it is next door to mine, and I ask him to reconsider that good idea. The principle does not need changing, but perhaps we should review the use of the orders, so that the police can use them more constructively and energetically than they have been able so far to do. Those are the sentiments of my local police officers, which they have expressed to me.

Transport does not figure largely in the Queen's Speech, but it is mentioned to me regularly. The train service to Sheffield is not a first class service, even if the trains have first class carriages. Trains to Sheffield are much slower than those to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, North, which take half an hour less to do the same distance. That is a real problem that has been created and worsened by privatisation and the fragmentation of rail services. We could get a quicker train service to Sheffield by either making track improvements to the midland main line or by having tilting trains that could go faster on the existing track. The problem is that one demands action by the operating company and the other demands action by Railtrack. The two never seem to come together, and no one has decided which is the best way forward. I hope that with the creation of the Strategic Rail Authority we will start to address that issue.

I hope that we will also address the issue of whether the midland main line is the best line to take people to Sheffield. Perhaps the east coast line should be improved and given extra capacity, which would allow a quick line to Sheffield. The franchise for the east coast line is a completely different issue from the franchise for the midland line, but one or the other is the solution to Sheffield's problem. The problem with rail privatisation is the fragmentation of the industry and the lack of a strategic overview, and I hope that the SRA will begin to address those issues.

On the doorstep, my constituents raise the issue of buses even more frequently than that of rail, because buses are the day-to-day transport for most people in Sheffield. We have made many improvements to our public services in the past four years, and my constituents recognise that, but we have seen little improvement with buses. Indeed, it is questionable whether we are providing a public service at all in many cases. A duopoly has been created between Stagecoach and First Bus—or, as it is laughingly referred to in Sheffield, Secondhand Bus, because the quality of buses provided has deteriorated recently—and if constituents complain about a bus service being removed, I can do nothing but say that it is purely a private decision with no real influence from the public sector.

The Transport Act 2000 has not had time to have an effect. It will promote quality partnerships as the best way forward, but I am not convinced of that. I hope that Ministers will consider franchising, which is seen as a long-stop option in the Act, as the best approach. Unlimited public resources are not available for bus services, but franchising could be a solution. An operator would tender for an area and as well as receiving the right to provide services on profitable routes it would also have the obligation to provide services on less profitable or uneconomic routes. We could have a strategic view from the public sector, with the private sector delivering and having responsibilities as well as rights. I hope that we will come back to that idea in future.

In South Yorkshire—and Sheffield is part of South Yorkshire—

Mr. Kevin Hughes: Only just.

Mr. Betts: We are part of South Yorkshire for objective 1 funding purposes, and we receive that funding as one of the poorest areas of the country with one of the highest levels of unemployment. It is therefore an absolute nonsense, when the standard spending assessments are decided and the grants given out, that our per capita grant should be below what is given to many more affluent parts of the country. That is not acceptable, and I am sure that all hon. Members with South Yorkshire constituencies are committed to fighting for a change in the system. We respect and recognise what the Government did in their first term to improve the situation, but the system is still not fair. We will continue to fight for that fairness.

The care of the elderly by local authorities still gives cause for concern. It has to be accepted that funding for that care is still too low. Under the caring Liberal Democrats, Sheffield city council has told those of my elderly constituents who cannot get in and out of the bath but who could use a shower if they had one that they cannot have money for the necessary alterations if they are able to have a strip wash. That is official council policy. I do not think that that is anything like first-class public service provision. It is a denial of people's basic human rights. That is something else that I want to challenge.

I do not regard as anathema the proposal to bring the private sector into the provision of public services. In some cases, it is right to do so, but the public oppose

threats to privatise those tasks where public sector workers do a first-class job. That is what is happening with Sheffield's refuse collectors. Not only does such a move put a good public service at risk, but it says to public service workers that no account will be taken of how well they do their jobs when it comes to deciding whether they should continue to provide the service. That is worrying, and my colleagues in Sheffield and I will continue to speak out about it.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): Is the council Labour controlled?

Mr. Betts: It is controlled by the Liberal Democrats. They opposed privatisation when they came into power.

I have always been concerned about housing. Like me, other hon. Members will have found, during the election campaign, that people understand that the Government have established the minimum wage and the working families tax credit, and that they have increased child benefit and created more jobs. On some estates, however, people live in homes and an environment that has not changed much.

It is not that the Government have not made improvements: in the past four years, for example, Sheffield's housing capital budget has doubled, rising from £20 million to £40 million. The problem is that the repair backlog is so long that the work that is being done hardly scratches the surface.

In my constituency—where the housing is by no means the worst in Sheffield—people still live in homes where the windows are warped, where water comes in through the roof and where there is no central heating. The Government's commitment to put all rented properties into a proper state of repair by 2010 is right, but it must not be assumed that, to achieve that, millions of people will automatically vote to transfer their homes to alternative landlords.

In Sheffield, the reality is that people want to remain with the council, regardless of its failings and inadequacies. They believe, however, that remaining with the council should not prejudice their chances of having their homes put into a decent state of repair. That is a challenge for the Government to overcome.

I favour the option of establishing companies wholly owned by local authorities, in whose management tenants could be involved. That is an exciting and attractive way forward, but the Government may have to be more flexible about how they allow private investment in such homes, as is the case with housing association properties. Tenants in Sheffield want a level playing field.

There will be some very real challenges over the next four years. We have made an excellent start in many areas, and that is why we have been re-elected, but the electorate have made it clear that they want more to be done, as standards are not high enough yet. The Labour party's campaign theme was that much had been done, and much more remained to be done. There is much more to do to raise standards in our public services. That will be the challenge for the Government over the four or five years of this Parliament.

6.9 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts), freed now from the constraints of Trappist silence on the Front Bench,

reminds us, as have others, of the importance of delivering higher quality public services to the people whom we represent. Our constituents challenge us about the democratic process and ask how we represent them. When we tell them that we will make representations and fight for better services, for their road to be mended and all the other things that matter to them, but then fail to deliver, they switch off and say that the process is incapable of responding to their individual needs. That represents a major challenge for us as democrats. We must address the low turnout at the general election.

As a member of the last Conservative Administration, it is important to put on record that the Conservative party was never against public services. [Laughter.] Labour Members laugh, but I will pick from what we introduced one example from which the Secretary of State for Health has benefited: the private finance initiative or public-private partnership. If it had not been for problems introducing one Bill, we too could have boasted achievements in that area in new hospital building. I wish that we had achieved that, but I congratulate him on taking a good idea forward and delivering what we all want for our constituents, which is improved public capital, whether for health, education, transport or other services. That idea was invented on our side of the House, not the other.

It was the Conservative party that introduced local management for schools. In the Gracious Speech there are proposals further to devolve moneys back to schools. We pioneered that idea because we realised the importance of improving the delivery of education locally and that the way to achieve that was to give more responsibility financially to individual schools.

It was the Conservative Government who put 16,000 more police officers into service to improve community safety. Sadly, we had some good ideas in the general election, but we may have talked a little too much about tax cuts and not enough about our good ideas for improving health and education. The Conservative party has some lessons to learn.

In the House yesterday the Prime Minister talked about the extra teachers, doctors and others who, he claims, will deliver enhanced public services. I want to address whether that is possible by putting some of the numbers into perspective. We are told that the Government intend over the lifetime of this Parliament—not next year or the year after, but over the lifetime of this Parliament—to introduce 10,000 more teachers. The Library tells me that there are 204 education authorities. Over five years that represents on average just 10 extra teachers per authority. To apply the same logic to the 20,000 classroom assistants who are required, that works out at just 20 extra classroom assistants per year, per authority. [Interruption.]

The Secretary of State for Health is mouthing something from a sedentary position, so I will move on to doctors. If two thirds of our 10,000 doctors go into the hospital sector, that represents 6,000 doctors. If that number is divided between our 500 health trusts, there will be two and a half new doctors per year per trust. When the same logic is applied to nurses, there will be just eight per year per health trust. That puts in perspective the Government's rhetoric. They are fond of throwing large numbers around in an attempt to convince the public that that alone is the solution to better quality

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public services. I question where these people are to come from and whether they will be delivered in time. I suspect that we shall be disappointed.

The Secretary of State for Health avoided the difficulties that he ran into on waiting lists. He said that waiting lists were out and waiting times were in. I noticed that he did not talk about outpatient waiting times—the time it takes to see a consultant.

I looked at the figures year on year for the Blackpool Victoria hospital trust, our major acute trust, and I found that in 16 of the 20 specialties, there had been a dramatic increase in the number of weeks that patients had to wait to see a consultant. For example, in paediatrics there was a 69 per cent. increase in the number of weeks to see a consultant, in neurology 54 per cent., in cardiology 62 per cent., in care of the elderly 58 per cent. and in gynaecology 67 per cent.

Have there been any improvements? Yes—remarkably, in orthopaedics there has been an improvement of 31 per cent. and in ophthalmology of 27 per cent. Why? Because those were the only two specialties affected by the clinical priority-distorting waiting list initiative. Those were the only two areas to benefit from extra resources, and some of those resources have now gone.

People will want to see some improvement, but I doubt whether the Secretary of State will be able to deliver to the Blackpool Victoria hospital trust in the next four years the number of additional consultants necessary to meet those requirements. I hear staff at that hospital trust speaking about the differences between the hospital's financial situation and that of the local health authority, to the extent that the hospital is £1 million down on its budget.

I hope that the Secretary of State and his colleague, the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), will devise some way of avoiding brush wars between hospital trusts and health authorities when each side has a different view of funding. It is not a question of extra provision, but of providing the money to deliver even basic services, notwithstanding any improvements that might result—though I doubt it—from the Secretary of State's proposed Bill.

On education, I had meetings with primary school heads before the election. I welcome the fact that the Government are committed to a report on red tape, but I see nothing in the Queen's Speech to deal with the shopping list according to which head teachers will judge whether there has been an improvement in public services. They agree that they have had more money than ever before, but they have had more work as well—too many assessments, no value-added tables, too much concentration on preparing children for tests, and not enough on education in the round, too much demand for planning, too many initiatives and too much prescriptiveness from the centre. Unless those problems are remedied, those teachers and the parents who speak to them will not perceive that there has been any improvement in education.

What about the issue of popular schools? The Government have not tackled that. Many parents recognise quality and want to send their children to such schools, but there is nothing in the Gracious Speech to suggest how that trick is to be pulled. On secondary

education, I smiled wryly when I learned that the Government want more specialist schools. I already have one—the Lytham St. Anne's high technology college.

I spoke to the head teacher, who is waiting to find out whether he will ever get a dining room big enough to accommodate more than one sixth of the children at any one time. He is worried because he does not have the funding to deliver the new AS curriculum. Because of the problems of his budget, he struggles to deal with educationally disturbed pupils. There has not been investment in the infrastructure of his school commensurate with the number of extra pupils going into that establishment. For him, the Bill announced in the Queen's Speech will be irrelevant. For the parents of children at that school, the Government's proposed measures will be irrelevant unless the issues on the shopping list are addressed.

The problems faced by Lytham St. Anne's high technology college are faced by many other schools. The Gracious Speech offered no comfort as regards the future of that school's sixth form. The best that Labour could do in its manifesto was to promise that in real terms, funding would be maintained for sixth forms. There was no commitment to maintain sixth forms. When I wrote to the local learning and skills council to ask whether it had a policy on sixth forms, it could offer no policy and no guarantees.

I shall deal finally with community safety. Many people judge the quality of our public services by the safety of the communities in which they live. We have spoken about police numbers. The increase in Lancashire will barely keep up with the number of officers retiring, and the number who are sick or on light duties means that the Lancashire force is 10 per cent. down on the numbers that it should have. In one ward in my constituency, Ingol, it is a struggle to provide one community beat officer, and when local people ask that officer to take action to deal with people who ought to be the subject of anti-social behaviour orders, the officer is hard pushed to keep up with the challenge. That story can be replicated over a large part of this country. I see little in the Queen's Speech to address the issue.

There are three words about public services that we need to take into account: quality, responsiveness and customers. There are issues of quality. Some have talked about old people. I have seen many cases of run-down social services failing to serve the needs of the elderly. We need to improve quality in that respect.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, we must learn to be more responsive if we are to understand how our public services can be improved. Above all, we must recognise that the people whom we represent are the customers of those services. We are not here to do them a favour; we are here to fight for the best public services for them. I shall certainly support measures to achieve that objective, but I see little real progress on that score in this Queen's Speech.

6.20 pm

Mr. Greg Pope (Hyndburn): Like some other contributors to this debate, I have had a lengthy period of enforced silence. It is nice to find my voice again in this House. My last speech in this House was so long ago that I made it from the Opposition Benches. It was in a different era—so long ago that John Major was Prime Minister,

Blackburn Rovers played in Europe and the now right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) was a right winger.

It gives me great pleasure to give a broad welcome to the Queen's Speech. It is right that the Government, as they begin their second term, should concentrate on the issues on which they won the general election: improving public services, getting extra investment into schools, hospitals and the police, and, crucially, reforming those services.

One thing that surprised me when I was out campaigning in my constituency and in others last month was the sheer anger at the way in which some people are treated by those working in our public services. As someone who has always been a strong supporter of the police, I was particularly surprised at the anger among victims of crime over the way in which they are treated by the police force in Lancashire. Many constituents told me that, having been burgled, they had rung the police but the police did not seem to care and took a long time to visit them—sometimes not even on the same day. That is unacceptable. I therefore welcome the police Bill in the Queen's Speech.

Of course we all want extra police officers. The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) said that police numbers in Lancashire have been falling but that now they are going up again. That is good, but the matter is not just one of police numbers and money. We need to reform the culture of the service, consider greater civilianisation of the police and ask whether we have struck the right balance between the numbers of traffic police and those tackling burglaries, because I am not sure that we have in Lancashire.

I am also pleased that there will be a Bill on House of Lords reform. That early pledge appeared in Labour's first manifesto 101 years ago, and we are just getting round to addressing it. I am not sure whether old Labour was very good at delivering on its early pledges.

To a certain extent, the Government have done the politically easy part—from Labour's point of view—by proceeding with abolishing hereditary peers, and hurrah for that. What an anachronism they are in the 21st century. However, I issue a friendly warning to Government Front Benchers. Getting rid of hereditaries is one thing, but it is much harder to build a consensus on what should replace the House of Lords in the second stage of reform. I am not terribly convinced by the proposals on offer.

I have always preferred a unicameral Parliament, which would have a couple of immediate good effects. The first would be to enhance at a stroke the status of this House, about which hon. Members have been complaining for years. Secondly, it would stop the Government—I do not mean my Government but any Government—introducing badly drafted legislation. There is a temptation for Governments to do so—I was a bit of an expert on this about a year ago—when they know that they have the backstop of the House of Lords to change the Bill.

How many times have hon. Members served on Standing Committees, scrutinised legislation for weeks or even months, seen the Bill go off to the other place to return unrecognisable and be given only one day on the Floor of the House to discuss Lords amendments? That is not a sensible way of scrutinising legislation in a modern democracy and we should change it.

The other reason why I am worried about House of Lords reform is that I do not want people to be appointed to my Parliament. My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes) said that he opposed an elected second Chamber, but I take a different view. I am completely in favour of a wholly elected second Chamber with prescribed powers. Such a Chamber might operate like a small senate. It does our democracy no good if Parliament has Members who are not accountable to the people, so we should consider the alternatives.

On Europe, I welcome the announcement of a Bill to ratify the treaty of Nice. I am very keen for the European Union to be enlarged. I also want the British Government to have a greater say in the Council of Ministers, which will be achieved through the re-weighting of votes. As a friendly criticism, I point out to my Government that those of us who want the single currency to succeed have been disappointed by how timorous they have been about promoting the concepts of Europe and the single currency. We are not winning the political argument, indeed, we have not even engaged in such an argument on the single currency. We are in a strong position only because of the utter uselessness of the Conservatives in adopting their ridiculous "Only 12 days to save the pound" campaign two weeks before polling day. That was nonsense and people knew it, but the issue is nevertheless going by default. I welcome what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said yesterday, but I want the Government to adopt a much stronger tone in making the case for Europe as a whole and the single currency in particular.

On education, we have made some great steps forward in the primary sector. Standards are going up, class sizes are falling and investment is going in throughout my constituency. There is a welcome building programme, which is a tangible sign of our investment in public services. However, surely the time has come to make such a step change in the secondary sector.

I have a couple of particular worries about education, the first of which concerns specialist schools. I have no problem with such schools and am proud that a school with technology college status, the Hollins, is situated in my constituency, but I am worried about the idea of capping their number. As they are a good idea and there are objective criteria, why cannot every school aspire to be a specialist school? My second concern relates to admissions. Admissions policy is in an absolute mess throughout my constituency, and I am sure that the same applies throughout Lancashire and many other local education authority areas. In my constituency, children who live cheek by jowl with their local schools are being offered places at schools that are situated eight miles away, which is completely unacceptable. I am sure that the education Bill will deal with admissions, on which I hope that the Government will get a grip.

I am pleased that we will have a free vote on foxhunting, about which hundreds of people have written to me to express their dismay. I could not explain to them how a Government with a majority of 178 did not manage to ban foxhunting, and they will be even more dismayed if a Government with a similar majority fail to ban it in a second term. I say to the Government that a free vote is one thing, but once such a vote has occurred, a Bill must be introduced at an early opportunity. They must have the political will and courage to use the Parliament Acts to force through the will of the House of Commons on foxhunting.

[Mr. Greg Pope]

I want briefly to make a couple of further points, the first of which returns me to the speech that I made nine years ago when I entered the House. The speech dealt with housing in my constituency. The truth is that many of my constituents have been failed by us and by the previous Administration. I met a woman who lives in a house that is practically falling down. There are thousands—if not tens of thousands—of such people in my constituency. She told me that she was not going to vote and felt that she had been let down 10 years ago by a Tory Government and a Labour council, and now, when there is a Labour Government and a Tory council. Her house is a disgrace in the modern age, and we must not walk away from such people. I am pleased to be a voice for her in demanding that Lord Falconer visit my constituency in the near future.

My final point may be surprising, given that I spent the past four years as a Government Whip and the preceding two as an Opposition Whip. I believe that the House of Commons matters greatly. I do not want the Chamber to be sidelined; it should be at the heart of national political debate. I welcome the Hansard Society report that was published earlier this week. It contained some interesting ideas and made a welcome contribution to the debate, although I did not agree with all the conclusions. However, it is important to reinvigorate the House if we are to stand any chance of re-engaging with the electorate before the next general election. I look forward to participating in that process.

6.30 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I welcome Ministers with new responsibilities to the Front Bench and congratulate those who have been promoted. I welcome back the Secretary of State for Health. I do not entirely envy him the task ahead, although I cannot say the same about the salary.

We were treated to two maiden speeches this afternoon. The first was made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz), who spoke confidently. He intimated in the Tea Room that he was nervous; he did not show it. His predecessor was never afraid of holding the Executive to account, and I am sure that he wants to maintain the independent stance of both his immediate predecessors, although I hope that he never runs up the repair bills of Ron Brown. He told us that he had been a resident in Edinburgh for 25 years. As someone who comes from the west of Scotland but did general practitioner training outside Edinburgh, I can tell him that it will be another 25 years before he can apply for native status.

We also heard the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke), who paid tribute to her predecessor, Christopher Fraser. He quickly established a reputation in the House for good humour and authority. Many Conservative Members will miss him as a friend as well as a colleague. I hope that the hon. Lady enjoys the same success and popularity. However, she will understand that it would be disingenuous of me to wish her a longer tenure than her predecessor.

The hon. Lady made an important point that is relevant to many areas, especially in the west and south-west of England, about the area cost adjustment and the amount

of local government finance that is made available. I am sure that a strong cross-party alliance will press for a review of the method of allocating money, especially to rural areas in those parts of the country.

Many good contributions were made from both sides of the House. My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) gave one of the best speeches of the day. He spoke graphically about the human cost of the foot and mouth outbreak. He reminded us that when media attention had moved elsewhere and the general election campaign was in full swing, the suffering continued and still goes on. His explanation brought that home to the whole House.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) talked about the importance of choice in public services and the need to give parents, patients and professionals greater freedom to decide what is best, free from the dead hand of Whitehall.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) criticised omissions from the Gracious Speech at length. He said that, in the next election campaign, the Government could make no excuses for failing to deliver and that prompt action should be taken. I noticed that the Government Whip avidly took notes during that speech.

The hon. Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes) showed us that old Labour had not disappeared, but was merely asleep in the Whips Office for four years. He said, "We must find out where the money is being spent before we pour in any more." That statement alone would almost qualify him as a contender for the Tory leadership.

I welcome my friend, the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Mr. Pope), to a speaking role. We now have a chance in the House to savour his humour, which we have appreciated in the watering holes of the Palace of Westminster in recent years. His disarming honesty about our methods of legislating and running our affairs was refreshing. We look forward to much more of the same.

Almost all hon. Members who spoke agreed that the Parliament will be about delivery in public services. The Government must provide world class public services by the next election. That does not simply mean better or good public services, but services that can compete with the best in the world.

On health, we must get our targets right above all else. We cannot provide effective services if we cannot decide what we are trying to achieve. Since the inception of the national health service, we have concentrated on input and throughput, and the political argument has been about that. We need to base our targets on outcome. I ask the Secretary of State to consider the need to standardise the methodology of determining outcome in the NHS before we can ensure that our funding is correctly invested. If we do not know what is coming out of the service, and if we cannot measure it properly, we shall largely be working in the dark, irrespective of how much funding we are going to put into the system.

I turn to the proposals in the Gracious Speech. It contains measures that we shall, of course, welcome—not least those on adoption. We are keen to see the envisaged provisions on adoption brought to fruition as quickly as possible, but I stress that all the measures will need proper scrutiny. The Bill will raise many important issues, not least those relating to social services, which will be asked to do much more than they do now. It will be essential to match the tasks being asked of them with the funding

being guaranteed to them. Nothing could be worse than this House deciding what needs to be done to protect the most vulnerable—in the consensual way that we shall, on this subject—and the money not being available to bring the measures into effect. The House must consider that very carefully. Indeed, the issue of social services provision in general will need to be assessed.

The No. 1 crisis facing the health service at present is that of the number of beds being lost in the care home sector and the consequent number of beds being blocked in the acute sector. Up and down the country, between 10 and 15 per cent. of acute beds are being blocked. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon pointed out, it would be pointless to pour money into the acute sector if there were no beds available in the community to which patients could be discharged. If that were to happen, any increase in money and activity in the acute sector would, paradoxically, block more beds and exacerbate the problems of patients who were waiting.

The Government could, now that they are free from the yah-boo politics of the immediate pre-election period, stand back and consider whether the balance is correct between the level of acute funding and the level of community funding envisaged in the increases set out in the Red Book. That would be a useful initial exercise for them to undertake, and I would say that it is their most urgent task of all.

We were delighted that, immediately after the election, the Secretary of State for Health broke the record for any Government implementing one of the main planks of the Opposition's manifesto by abolishing the waiting list criteria. He did this immediately after the election and just after the announcement of the increase in the number of patients waiting. Those points were raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), who spoke of the difficulty of reconciling the Government's stated aims with their actions, which results in increased anger among professionals and patients. General practitioners and consultants are up in arms and threatening to leave the NHS. They say that there is too much red tape, that consultation times have gone down and that they have too little clinical freedom. Those themes were also taken up by the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth).

My right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) also took this view into the field of education, when he spoke of the gap between the Government's rhetoric on education and the reality in the schools in his constituency. The Government will have to address the fact that the huge level of expectation raised during the election has made their job more difficult.

We shall have to look closely at the Government's proposals on two health issues in the Gracious Speech. They want to increase patient representation. In an Orwellian doublespeak way, that means the abolition of the community health councils. I have to say to the Secretary of State that that proposal is no more palatable in this Parliament than it was in the previous one. We might as well look out our notes on that issue, because we are going to have to rehearse all the same arguments all over again. I urge him to think again on that issue.

When the Secretary of State talked about decentralisation, he was moving into the Government's realm of earned autonomy. Earned autonomy means, "You can do what you like, as long as you have agreed

in advance with the Government what it is going to be." That does not strike me as the sort of decentralisation that those at the sharp end of the services want.

It is also interesting to note what is not in the Gracious Speech. The absence of a ban on tobacco advertising has been mentioned throughout the debate by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Conservative Members never agreed that that was as important as the Government said it was, but if the Government were as sincere as they said they were, it is odd that the provision was not in the Queen's Speech.

The real scandal of omission in the Gracious Speech is that there is no mention of mental health legislation. At the 1997 election, the Labour party said that that was a matter of great urgency, yet nothing was done in its first term and there is nothing in the Gracious Speech. That means that the Government will be at least seven and a half years into their term of office before any changes are made to one of the most important aspects of our legislation. I say to the Secretary of State that that is far too long to wait for a review. We have been promised one year after year and, if the Government can still find time, the Opposition will be as co-operative as possible, in dealing with issues that are extremely difficult, but which none the less need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

I would also be interested to hear the Secretary of State's view on the omission of the moratorium on genetic testing, which the Government talked about during the election and before. For them, however, the defining issue in terms of delivery of public services will perhaps be the involvement of the private sector. We need to move from the simple concept of public services to the concept of services provided to the public, and we must use whatever skills, expertise and capacity are available to improve services.

We have all read in the papers that there is a difference of opinion between No. 10 and the Department of Health about the speed at which those matters should move forward. No doubt the instant memoirs industry will tell us which version is correct, but it is important to improve the delivery of public services by using the private sector wherever possible. We have discussed the private finance initiative, and the quality of PFI contracts is determined by how well they are negotiated, but it is also extremely important that the Government are honest about their intentions.

I was with the former Minister of State for Health at the Royal College of Nursing conference when he again said that the Government's concordat is about NHS doctors and NHS nurses treating NHS patients in private facilities where there is excess capacity. That is an extraordinarily disingenuous view of what the concordat says. It refers to

"Primary care groups or Primary Care Trusts commissioning directly from a private and voluntary health care provider."

In other words, it is possible entirely to bypass clinical provision in the NHS.

The Government should at least be honest about what they propose, because nothing could be worse in such a debate than them pretending to their own Back Benchers that they have agreed one thing when here we have, in black and white, something quite different. If they do not have the truth told, we will never be able to have an honest debate.

[Dr. Liam Fox]

I would like to hear the Secretary of State's view on a matter that is, perhaps, more important than any other. Over recent days, many of us will have read with alarm newspaper reports such as that in *The Sunday Times* money section entitled, "Labour scraps free nursing care pledge". What the Government proposed was explicit in the national plan and in their contributions to Committee debates, which the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) will remember. Section 15:18 of the national plan says:

"From October 2001 . . . nursing care provided in nursing homes will be fully funded by the NHS. People should not be asked to contribute towards the cost of their nursing care".

Now we realise that all sorts of caveats will be placed on that and that people will be asked, according to some means test, to provide a part—greater or lesser, depending on where or in which part of the country they live—of their nursing care.

The report in *The Sunday Times* added:

"The Department of Health said yesterday that no formal decision had yet been made."

There can be no room for confusion, however, and the Government's pledge was absolutely, totally, 100 per cent. clear. We supported them in Committee and in the House of Lords on the understanding that all nursing care would be fully funded and any backtracking on that will be regarded as the most brazen betrayal of elderly voters ever undertaken by any Government in a general election.

The Government won a clear victory in the general election, and there would be no point in going over in the coming months the arguments that we had before the election. They have a large parliamentary majority and a parliamentary programme, and what we legislate on is entirely in their hands for the next four years, but they have raised both expectations and questions about their intentions.

It is time for Ministers to give straight answers to the questions raised from both sides of the House during the debate, if we are to be able to believe that spin is out and delivery is in. For the meantime, the jury is most definitely out.

6.44 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): This has been an extremely constructive and positive debate about the future of public services.

First and most importantly of all, let me pay tribute to the two hon. Members who made their maiden speeches today, not just for the quality of their contributions but for their bravery in making them so early in their parliamentary careers. The hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke) paid an extremely handsome and fulsome tribute to her predecessor. Perhaps her only omission was her refusal to mention the one person whom many people regard as being responsible for getting her elected: a certain Mr. Billy Bragg.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz) also made an important contribution. He has had a long and successful career in local government and I have no doubt whatever that he will make a long and successful contribution to the proceedings of the House. In highlighting Labour's

achievements in its first term, he reminded us of how far we have to go in both reforming and investing in our key public services.

This debate has been overwhelmingly about health and education—necessarily. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) said in a rather philosophical speech—I shall read the details of it later and hopefully understand it more than I did the first time round—the priority for the Government in this second term is to reform all our key public services, not just health and education but transport, the police and welfare services.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle), for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) and for Hyndburn (Mr. Pope) rightly said, strong public services are the foundation for a strong society, in which there are opportunities not just for some people but for all our citizens and all our communities.

I suspect that, for many of my hon. Friends, it is a delicious irony that the official Opposition chose for this first full day's debate on the Queen's Speech the very subject that they spent virtually the whole of the general election campaign ignoring, namely health and education. That point was made by the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack). I can only conclude that, during the election campaign, their minds were more concentrated on the forthcoming election campaign than on the outcome of the general election.

At one point, I became worried about the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) because he seemed to have disappeared from view. He disappeared from the television studios and I searched up and down the country for him. Indeed, I went to his constituency and took with me a 10 ft wooden trojan horse as a reminder of his policy on health: private health insurance rather than investment in the national health service. However, I could not find him there either.

The hon. Gentleman brags that his majority went up, but the majority in the country went one way. We know that we have a job of work to do, but he should know—I hope that he draws this important lesson from the general election campaign—that the Conservatives were not trusted in 1997 on public services and they were not trusted in 2001 either. I hope that he survives the trials and tribulations of the forthcoming leadership election campaign. That would be good news for him; it would be rather better news for us because he and his hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench—and, I suspect from some of the contributions that we heard today, on the Opposition Back Benches too—are responsible for the parlous state in which today's Conservative party finds itself. That is because of the paucity of their policies on public services.

The issue of public services is what concerns people the most. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) talks about delivery. I agree that people are concerned about delivery and we know that we have a job of work to do. However, what was interesting about this afternoon's debate is that we heard so much, including from the hon. Member for Woodspring, about problems in the national health service and so little about how to make progress in the NHS.

The right hon. Member for Fylde made a good speech. He talked down the number of doctors and of nursing posts that we shall create over the next few years. There

will be 10,000 more doctors and 20,000 more nurses, as well as lots more teachers and police officers. I hope that he has had the opportunity to read his manifesto and to draw some conclusions from it. Whereas our manifesto promises extra doctors and nurses, his promises not a single extra nurse or doctor. As I understand it, it did not promise a single extra police officer or teacher either. That is because the Conservatives made a different choice. We chose to put the public's priorities first—to put investment in, and reform of, the national health service, the education system, transport and the police service first. As he fairly concluded in his speech, the Conservatives put something else first: they put unaffordable tax cuts first, and they got the result that they deserved.

Dr. Fox: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way, as time is limited. He referred to extra doctors, teachers and nurses. What is his definition of the word "extra"? Does it mean more than trend or more than previously planned? Will they be full-time? Will it be a net increase?

Mr. Milburn: Extra means on top of the position in 2000. We have not done the count for 2001 yet—we carry out an annual census in September, and we shall publish the results of that. I am extremely confident that we shall continue to make progress in recruiting and retaining extra doctors and extra nurses.

Dr. Fox: Is it net?

Mr. Milburn: There will a net increase of 10,000 doctors and 20,000 nurses. Conservative Front-Bench Members have no right to complain about the lack of ambition—as the right hon. Member for Fylde called it—of our targets in our manifesto, given that they promised not a single extra doctor or a single extra nurse.

Mr. Jack: Does the Secretary of State agree that he is now responsible for delivering those extra public servants? Does he also agree with me that if the numbers of extra staff are spread out across the nation, there will be few per health unit, per police station or per school? He will have to make any progress that he makes very clear if the public are to believe the rhetoric. As my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) said, there is a gulf between the Secretary of State's rhetoric and what we believe will be the reality.

Mr. Milburn: The public will see further expansion in staff numbers. There must be an increase in the number of staff working at the front line in the national health service. We need more doctors and nurses, clinical scientists and physiotherapists, and we need more backroom staff, who provide essential services in order that front-line staff can do their job and improve services for patients. We can do that only if we make the right choices as a country and as political parties. The choice that we made was to provide investment. The choice that the Conservative party made was completely different. I was pleased to see the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) present earlier. He will be a constant reminder of the Conservative party's real agenda on public services, which is not extra investment, but cuts.

I know how far we have to go. I am a great supporter of the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis). I do not know whether that is a help or a

hindrance to him—it is another lost vote. He made important points about the progress that we need to make on clinical negligence, infections in hospitals and expansion in services. Importantly, he made a crucial point about what we need to do about the culture of the NHS and other public services. They must be attuned to the needs of the public. The only vested interest that should count in the national health service is that of the patient. The only vested interest that should count in schools is that of the pupil and the parent. That is where we need to get to.

There is a long way to go. I have acknowledged on many occasions that there are problems in the health service and that NHS staff are working under real pressure, but it paints a false picture always to allow the problems to obscure the progress that has been made during the past four years. We now have 17,000 more nurses and 6,500 more doctors. We have a hospital building programme that is delivering hospitals rather than just extra cash for accountants and lawyers. We have put more investment into primary care and community services. My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes) asked about the expansion in GP numbers, as did the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth). During the next few years, we expect to have at least 2,000 extra GPs working in surgeries up and down the country. By 2005, we will have increased the number of medical students by 57 per cent., which is the biggest rise on record and a guarantee of expansion in doctor numbers not just for a few years but for a decade or more. All that is underpinned by the extra resources demanded by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), not just for health but for social services.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) reminded us, there is much progress still to be made, especially in the poorer parts of the country, where we know that health needs are greatest and resources have not always matched those needs. It is because of that knowledge that I can tell him and, indeed, Members on both sides of the House who have made the point about distribution of resources that we will conduct an urgent review to ensure that resources are better for, and more fairly distributed to, the parts of the country that need them most. I trust that that will be helpful, at least at this stage. I do not know whether the outcome of the review will be helpful, following its publication, but it will at least be helpful in assessing where health needs are greatest and trying to direct resources in that direction.

Dr. Evan Harris: Before the right hon. Gentleman leaves the subject of NHS staff, will he clarify one point? Previously, he has given assurances that under private finance initiative schemes clinical staff would still be employed by the NHS. Can he assure us again that, under PFI schemes and other privatisations, clinical staff delivering services to NHS patients will still be employed by the NHS?

Mr. Milburn: Yes. What is more—as the hon. Gentleman may be aware from our manifesto—we want to find ways of ensuring that better and fairer protection is given to staff who provide an important service and are, in many ways, part of the clinical team. I refer to the porters on the wards, the cleaners on the wards, the cooks, and those who provide laundry services. A few days ago,

[Mr. Milburn]

alongside my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, I was able to announce ways in which I hope we can secure the continued involvement of those staff members, as NHS employees, in PFI deals. We will trial that. We will try to make it work. I think it important to emphasise the importance of team working in the NHS.

Over the next few years, we will focus our activity on four key areas. The first covers services for conditions with the greatest clinical priority. That includes services for cancer and heart disease; services for the elderly, and services for those with mental health problems. They were mentioned by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) and by the hon. Member for Woodspring. The second covers primary care, the point of contact that most patients have with the NHS. The third covers emergency care, the point of contact that patients most need to know is there for them when they require it. The fourth relates to cutting waiting times. Those will be our priorities: those services will receive the most investment and the most reform.

More money is now going into the NHS, but, as Members on both sides of the House have acknowledged today, not just investment but reform is required to secure the best from those extra resources. We have a mandate for investment following the general election, but we also have a mandate for reform. There can be no veto on either investment or reform.

I say in all candour to the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), who is now the Liberal Democrat health spokesman—I welcome him to his position—that the Liberal Democrats will make a fatal mistake if they close their minds to change. Our services need not just extra cash, but some big changes. We must

change the culture of public services. We must ensure that those at the front end have the resources, power and influence that will enable them to deliver care to patients and education to pupils. That is what we have sought to do in the Queen's Speech, and what we will seek to do in the Bill that will follow.

In our first term, we established new national standards and new institutions to realise them. In our second term, with that framework in place, our priority is to devolve power to the NHS front line—to give the people who do the caring the cash and control that they need to improve services for patients. For all the talk that we hear from those on the Opposition Front Bench, it is worth remembering that when the Conservatives left office GPs working in primary care controlled just 15 per cent. of the NHS budget—just 15 per cent. of the total NHS resource. This year, GPs and others in primary care groups and primary care trusts control 50 per cent. of the NHS budget. As a consequence of the measures in the Queen's Speech, by 2004 they will control 75 per cent.

The national health service relies on the commitment and expertise of those in the front line—its doctors, nurses, scientists and therapists, and its cooks and cleaners too. Our job in government is to give them the resources and support that they need, so that they can get on with their job of improving care for patients. That is what this Queen's Speech—

*It being Seven o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.
Debate to be resumed tomorrow.*

THE SPEAKER'S ABSENCE

Resolved,

That the Speaker have leave of absence on Monday 25th June to attend the funeral of His Eminence Cardinal Thomas J. Winning, DCL, STL, DD, late Archbishop of Glasgow.—[Mr. Kemp.]

Heart Disease (Young People)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. Kemp.]

7 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): It is with some trepidation that I rise to address the House on the question of cardiac risk in the young, or sudden death syndrome. I say "trepidation" because it is a subject on which I am by no means an expert. Therefore, I am grateful to see that a number of colleagues are nevertheless remaining for the debate.

I wish to do justice to a fine young man whom I am proud to have as one of my constituents. His name is Adrian Woodhead. Adrian was married to Sarah and they were together for 10 years until, in 1997, just before Christmas, Sarah, who at the age of 28 had never been ill, had been very fit and was a non-smoker, suffered a massive heart seizure and died.

Adrian and Sarah had been hoping to start a family soon. He has movingly written to me about his feelings after that tragedy:

"I expected the house to be full of noise and life, as you get from children, not silent through death and loneliness . . . There is no structure to my life except for my work and my efforts to ensure that someone else might not have to go through this . . . I can do things for other people, but I can do nothing for myself."

Indeed, Adrian does a great deal for other people. At the time of the tragedy, he was an assembly line worker at Ford's. Since then, with great grit and determination, he has retrained as a police constable. When he passed out, he was awarded a baton of honour. He is a passionate exponent of the need to warn people about sudden death syndrome and its risk for the young. These are the three areas that Adrian has drawn to my attention: the need to raise awareness, the need for screening and the need for research. I shall address those in turn.

On the need to raise awareness, it is estimated that at least four young people in the United Kingdom die every week from sudden death syndrome; that is more than 200 tragedies every year. There is a great need to raise awareness among the public, so that, in those cases where symptoms begin to show themselves, they will be not lightly dismissed but investigated.

There is a need to raise awareness among general practitioners, so that, when young people go to see GPs with telling but not very severe warning symptoms, the GPs will act perhaps a bit more promptly than they do at present. In particular, GPs should be inquiring more whether other members of the family of the young person concerned have died young from heart failure, heart seizure or some other aspect of sudden death syndrome. If there is some history of that in the family, the young people should be screened.

There is a need for greater awareness on the part of coroners. All too often, when tragedies happen and young people die unexpectedly, the cause of death is given as accidental, natural causes or even, incorrectly, epilepsy.

The great problem with sudden death syndrome—cardiac risk in the young, or whatever one chooses to call it—is that one does not usually see it coming, and when it happens it is too late. Screening is common policy for cervical smears and for breast tests. With such conditions people can see the disease coming and screening is

accepted as a technique. It is a fact that an ordinary electrocardiogram will pick up the majority of the conditions constituting sudden death syndrome.

After the detection of such a condition, various prospects open up. There is the prospect of remedial action by implant, the prospect of remedial action by drugs, or the prospect of remedial action by changing one's life style. However, even in cases in which nothing is going to work and a fatal outcome cannot be averted, at least those who are subject to the genes responsible for those conditions can prepare themselves and their families for what will come, in the same way that families can prepare themselves when a child has a known terminal illness. People can do things now rather than postpone them, and they can choose what to do about whether to pass on the gene by having children.

Sudden death syndrome is a composite term for 10 main conditions. Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, or HCM, accounts for about 30 per cent. of the cases; arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy, or ARVC, accounts for about 20 per cent. of cases; and long QT syndrome accounts for another 10 per cent. Of those three categories, which account for 60 per cent. of the cases generically known as SDS, four fifths would be detected by ordinary electrocardiogram screening. If they were caught, the very least action that would be taken would be an echocardiogram—known as an ECHO—which is an ultrasound of the heart.

More than half of the 200-plus young people who die so tragically every year could be saved by medical intervention and change of life style, particularly because so many of those who die are very active. They are particularly likely to be engaged in serious and energetic sport, and sometimes they are engaged in professional sport. I recognise that we are talking about very serious conditions and that between one quarter and one third of those who are vulnerable will die regardless. In other words, between one quarter and one third of the 200-plus people who die each year from the conditions will probably suffer the same outcome regardless of whether their condition has been diagnosed in advance. Nevertheless, as I said, it is vital that people know what they have to contend with.

In professional tennis there is something called the Karen Krantzke sportsmanship award. It is given in memory of Karen Krantzke, an Australian doubles player who died at about age 30, in the mid-1970s, at the height of her powers. A friend of hers was Mrs. Alison Cox, who is the wife of Mark Cox—who as we all know was the No. 1 British tennis player in the 1970s.

In 1992, Mark and Alison's son Steven went to college in America on a sports scholarship. A few years earlier, a young man had died at that college from an SDS condition. Fearing future litigation, the college initiated a programme of automatic screening for young people on its intensive sports programmes. Consequently, it was discovered that Steven Cox, who was himself on the verge of a glittering tennis career, was suffering potentially from ARVC. Following that discovery and his decision to change his life style and forgo the professional tennis career that would otherwise have undoubtedly been his, he is still healthy at the age of 27, and it may well be that he owes his life to that screening in America.

It occurred to Alison Cox that not much had happened between the tragedy of Karen Krantzke in the mid-1970s and her own son's narrow escape in 1992, so she set up

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

Cardiac Risk in the Young, which aims to raise awareness and to exert pressure for more screening, in the hope that conditions here will begin to match those in other parts of the world. For example, in this country there are only 17 implants per 1 million citizens. In Germany, there are more than 60, and in America more than 200.

The aim of CRY is to identify, screen and treat those most at risk: first, those in whose family there has been a death at a young age, and secondly, those who are engaged in serious sport. Its ultimate aim is the routine screening of those who participate in any serious sport, as is the case in Italy. So far, CRY's pilot programmes to test the effectiveness of ECG machines in detecting hidden heart conditions in young people have led to the placing of 26 machines in local communities, worth a total of £130,000. The organisation has also funded a £120,000 ECHO machine, which is needed for heart ultrasound—the vital next step after an ECG has detected the possibility of an SDS defect in a young person.

Section 64 of the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968 gives the Secretary of State power to make discretionary grants to voluntary organisations in England working in support of health objectives of which the Government approve. CRY has tried five times to get a grant for its important work, and I wonder whether the Minister will be able to give us any encouragement and lead us to hope that a future application will be more successful.

Adrian's third point concerned the need for the research. I have referred briefly to implants. Internal cardiac defibrillators, or ICDs, kick-start a heart that has gone into seizure and regulate it after the attack. Five years ago, they were the size of half a brick; now they are the size of a matchbox. Five years ago, they required major surgery; now they can be implanted under local anaesthetic. Five years ago, they had to be sited deep in the stomach; now they are sited very near the surface, just below the collar bone, so that they can easily be tweaked, adjusted and serviced as required.

Drugs to thin the blood and prevent clotting are another form of medical intervention. Is the Minister satisfied that enough is being done to increase the number of implants that are being supplied, which would have to be tripled to match the number in Germany, and that enough research is being done on drugs to alleviate the dangers?

We must also consider genetic research. One of the objections to screening is the expense of ECGs and ECHO tests. I would be grateful if the Minister would indicate whether progress is being made on identifying a simple blood test for the gene that causes those syndromes. Does she accept that if that could be done, the expense argument against screening would fall? If so, would some of her objections to screening be overcome?

I am coming to the end of my remarks, but refer to a letter that the Minister wrote to Earl Howe on 8 May. It is clearly designed to be helpful, but at one point it states that studies show that

"screening does not identify all those affected"—

by SDS—

"and also that there is little evidence at present that treatment before the onset of symptoms alters the course of the disease."

I feel that the Minister has been supplied with information that may be a little out of date. As we have seen, implants can make a considerable difference to significant numbers

of people surviving an attack of that sort. It is true that sometimes there are symptoms before a potentially fatal attack but, all too often, they are not recognised, either by the potential victim or by his or her GP.

There remains the question about the ethics of screening and whether or not it is a good thing. In the country as a whole, 10,000 to 15,000 people may be at risk, whereas "only" 200-plus per year will suffer the fatal outcome. There remains the ethical question whether it is right to worry the large number to save some of the small number. I believe that the evidence is in the affirmative. Alison Cox told me that of the hundreds of people affected by cardiac risk with whom she has dealt, only one mother said that she wished she had not known that her child was vulnerable. I am glad to say that, so far, her child has not suffered an attack; long may that continue.

The final word on the ethics of screening should go to Adrian Woodhead, the young man to whom I referred at the beginning of my speech. He told me:

"I'd have loved to have had a couple of children with Sarah: even if I'd known they'd have been with me for a limited time. It doesn't matter what condition you have—you just deal with it. But to deal with it, you've got to know."

On Adrian's behalf and on behalf of all the young people who are vulnerable to the condition, I hope that the Minister will have something positive to say this evening.

7.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) on securing an early Adjournment debate in the new parliamentary Session and on choosing to bring these important issues to the attention of the House. He spoke movingly about the plight of his constituent and his constituent's family. This is an area that does not always get the attention that it deserves, but one that can be devastating for families when an apparently fit and healthy young person suddenly dies without warning. In an age when we have come to associate death with old age, rather than youth, young people being struck down before their potential is fulfilled, without the time for people to adjust and say goodbye, can be almost too much to bear for grieving families, including parents who lose loved children and young people.

I pay tribute to the dedicated work of Cardiac Risk in the Young and, indeed, other voluntary organisations that provide a counselling network to help families who suffer such a loss. Support from people with real experience of the condition can certainly be a remarkable comfort to those who live on.

CRY and other organisations with an interest in the conditions have made a plea for greater awareness of risk factors among health professionals. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the need to increase awareness and to provide more information. I agree wholeheartedly with the importance of doing so and I have asked officials to investigate the potential for using the new media that are now available to us for communicating with health professionals and members of the public—including, for example, NHS Online and the electronic library for health—to provide updated information about risk factors.

Unfortunately, data on the true incidence of cardiomyopathy are hard to come by. Some studies put the incidence of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy at one

person in 500. That is one of the problems that we encounter when we assess a proper policy response to the condition. Too little is known in many areas. As the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out, little is known about the number of deaths caused by cardiomyopathies. The Office for National Statistics recorded 35 deaths due to sudden adult death syndrome in 1999, but this is almost certainly an underestimate. I take seriously his point about the problems with the coroner system and the inability to make a full inspection of the heart tissue in a post mortem following a sudden adult death. He may be aware that the Home Office has announced a full review of the antiquated coroner system, which includes public health specifically in its terms of reference. I shall ensure that the points raised this evening are passed on to that review.

Research is being carried out at the Imperial college school of medicine under Professor David Woods into the incidence of sudden adult death syndrome, and I believe that the research will be published later this year. We look forward to its conclusions to enlighten the policy process further.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned a national screening programme of young people to identify those with cardiomyopathy and those who are at increased risk of sudden death, and CRY has also done a lot of work on that issue. The national screening committee has looked at those proposals very carefully. For a screening programme to be practicable, there needs to be a clear means of defining cases of the disease and the ability to make a prognosis on the basis of that definition. In addition, there needs to be good evidence that early intervention can improve the prognosis. In other words, we need evidence that a national screening programme would make a real difference to health outcomes rather than simply provide information that might have no impact on those outcomes.

In 1999, the Department's national screening committee commissioned Dr. Stuart Logan of the Institute of Child Health to examine the feasibility of population screening for hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. His recommendation was that population screening would not meet those key criteria. He argued that the most commonly used case definition—left ventricular hypertrophy on echocardiography—would miss some people at risk and would identify significant numbers of people whose life span is likely to be no different from that of the general population. He also concluded that studies have suggested that starting treatment before the onset of symptoms—the point that the hon. Gentleman quoted from my letter—makes no difference to the course of the disease. In other words, no clear benefit would accrue to those told as a result of screening that they had a particular condition. Dr. Logan's conclusions were accepted and endorsed by the national screening committee.

Similarly, the role of genetic screening for hypertrophic cardiomyopathy remains to be determined. The hon. Gentleman mentioned genetic screening, which has huge potential in many areas and its development may take us in many directions. I understand, however, that in an editorial in the July edition of the journal *Heart*, which will be published next month, the leading expert in the

field, Dr. Michael Vincent of the university of Utah, offers a conclusion on the present evidence base with regard to genetic testing for these conditions. The article states:

"Knowing the diagnosis, genotype or mutation type does not clearly influence treatment options or outcomes. Thus, there seems to be no compelling reason to perform genotyping for these clinical groups."

In other words, on the basis of what we know at this stage, Dr. Vincent concludes that information from gene testing would not be of practical use, given the limitations of our knowledge about how to improve outcomes.

I take very seriously what the hon. Gentleman said about not simply assuming that it is better for people not to know about their condition. It is wrong to make such judgments on behalf of other people. We must accept that giving people information about a condition that we may not be able to improve or for which we cannot offer alternative treatments or life styles can have psychological consequences. However, I agree that we cannot make presumptions about what people should know about their own health. My experience is that people increasingly want more information about their health and about the options open to them. They at least want the chance to decide for themselves what happens.

We must also bear in mind the evidence that exists about whether there is any positive benefit that should be taken into account. The 1999 study showed that there was insufficient evidence that the sort of diagnosis that would flow from a screening programme would be of benefit, but that is not to say that we should accept the findings of that study and do nothing to alter the status quo.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether implantable cardioverter defibrillators would take us further and change the position, and I shall ask the national screening committee to advise me on that. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence issued guidance in September 2000 on the use of such defibrillators. Implementation of that guidance in the NHS is expected to cause implantation rates to rise from the present 17 per 1 million people to around 50 per 1 million. Additional resources have been made available through health authority allocations to support the implementation of all the NICE recommendations.

Whether that will change the position in terms of screening depends on whether there is evidence that outcomes showed an improvement for people diagnosed with the condition at an early stage. We simply do not have evidence about how many casualties of sudden death syndrome would have benefited from ICDs, nor about how many people who might be diagnosed as a result of a screening process would also benefit from the implants. We need to know the answers to those critical questions to decide whether a screening programme was a good idea.

We also need more information about appropriate ways to treat the condition in general. The Cardiomyopathy Association, working with Professor William McKenna of St. George's hospital medical school, has been developing guidelines on the diagnosis and management of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. We await those guidelines with interest, and will consider how best to disseminate them when they are published.

I shall ask the national screening committee to consider whether there has been sufficient development—in terms of evidence and new treatment possibilities—for it to update the 1999 review. I will write to the hon. Gentleman

[Yvette Cooper]

on that subject, as I consider it important for us to keep an open mind and to review matters as research uncovers further evidence.

Finally, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that research is the way forward. He asked about section 64 funding for CRY. Departmental officials will meet CRY later this summer, and I hope that they will be able to discuss the priorities that should be taken into consideration when

section 64 funding is awarded. The hon. Gentleman will know that that the contest for that funding is sharp every year.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising these important matters, which are extremely serious for the families involved and especially for the constituent to whom he has referred this evening. I shall write to him with more information.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 22 June 2001

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr. SPEAKER in the Chair]

Member Sworn

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath:
Dave Watts, St. Helens, North.

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[THIRD DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [20 June].

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:
Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—
[Mr. Sheerman.]

Question again proposed.

Foreign Affairs and Defence

9.35 am

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Jack Straw): It a great honour to address the House for the first time as Foreign Secretary. There is a nice symmetry about moving to the Foreign Office from the Home Office because both Departments were created in 1782 in the wake of our defeat in America. The first Foreign Secretary, Charles James Fox, had a more distinguished record than the first Home Secretary, William Petty, who lasted in his post for only five days.

I wish to pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook). In his four years as Foreign Secretary, the United Kingdom's reputation abroad was greatly enhanced. In all the major international groupings to which we belong, Britain is regarded as a force for good and a partner on which to rely. The prosperity and security of our people have consequently been strengthened.

We shall continue to uphold the values that underpin our security and prosperity and that of our allies. Every human being is entitled to the fundamental freedoms of human rights and democracy. We shall use our influence in the world to help to confront tyranny, oppression, poverty, conflict and human suffering. I aim to build on

my right hon. Friend's achievements by pursuing an active and engaged foreign policy to provide practical benefits for the people of the United Kingdom.

There was a time when international relations, though vital, were conducted with little apparent relevance to people's daily lives at home. The direct attention of our citizens was engaged only when the diplomats failed and the national interest had to be determined not around the negotiating table but on the battlefield. How things have changed. On vital issues such as the environment, drugs and organised crime, the boundaries between foreign and domestic policy have become increasingly blurred. If we are to look after our interests at home, we have to be active and engaged overseas.

The interrelationship between domestic and foreign policy is best illustrated by our membership of the European Union. When I arrived at the Home Office in 1997, I was surprised by the amount of European Union work in which I was to be involved as Home Secretary. On asylum, crime, justice and security, I sought to work closely with our EU partners on palpably common European problems. I describe myself as a practical European because I have experienced at first hand the tremendous amount that we can achieve for Britain through engaging constructively in Europe.

In the general election campaign, one choice before the British people could not have been clearer: isolation from the rest of Europe or engagement with it. Of the many conclusions that we can draw from the result, one is incontrovertible. The British people overwhelmingly rejected the isolationist approach to Europe.

I referred to "the rest of Europe" for a good reason. We are, and always have been a European nation. Our monarchy was Danish, then Norman, then Dutch and then German. Engagement with Europe over many centuries, not disconnection from it, took us and the British flag to the four corners of the world.

There have been moments in our history when, in trying to consolidate the gains of the past, we might have cut loose strategically from the mainland of Europe. However, as the historian Norman Davies powerfully argues in his epic work "The Isles", our last opportunity to do that was in the fateful few days in August 1914. Instead, we chose military engagement in Europe, and the die was cast.

We are, and always have been European. The labels "pro" or "anti" European have therefore long seemed hopeless to me. How can we be pro or anti something that we are? Of course, there was a more recent moment in the early 1970s when the United Kingdom might have chosen a different sort of engagement with the continent of Europe. I know because I took part in that argument. However, that moment, too, has gone. With 15 nation states already members of the European Union and 13 at the door, our destiny as a European nation now lies indissolubly with the European Union.

Yes, the European Union has imperfections, but I suggest that its historic achievement is extraordinary. It has secured peace and prosperity among its members, when previously there was, with dismal regularity, war and destruction. It has made us all richer, safer and stronger and our people can live, work and travel anywhere within the borders of the world's largest single market. The EU is now a major player on the world stage, and we have achieved all this while preserving the nation

[Mr. Jack Straw]

states at its heart. The fact that Europe is a union of nation states is emphasised by the central role played by the 15 Heads of Government meeting regularly in the European Council.

Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): In case my right hon. Friend should be considered biased in his theme of engagement with Europe, will he consider the view of the former Foreign Secretary, Lord Hurd? Speaking in Hamburg on Wednesday, Lord Hurd said of the recent general election that it had settled

"the argument in my own Party that we could gain votes by treating our partners in Europe as enemies, by giving an unbalanced account of what is happening in Europe, and by frightening our citizens at every turn into the unreal fear of a European superstate."

Mr. Straw: I entirely endorse those words, and I think that the Conservative party accepts that that is the case. Indeed, when I was preparing this speech I wanted to include a few quotations from the Conservative party manifesto.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): Don't do it.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman says, "Don't do it." The fact is that I could not do it. I called up the Conservative party website, which contains a search engine, and typed in the word "manifesto". Back came nothing. I tried again, thinking that perhaps my information technology skills—which go before me—had failed me. I called in an expert, who also typed the word "manifesto" into the website, but nothing appeared. The truth is that the Conservatives have now wiped out their manifesto. Within 10 days of the election, it is no more. It is a non-manifesto for something approaching a non-party.

I was talking about the fact that the European Union is a union of nation states, which is emphasised by the fact that the 15 Heads of Government of those nation states play a central role in the determination of the policy and direction of the EU, meeting in the European Council.

I had the privilege of attending the Gothenburg European Council with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister last weekend. The full text of the Council's conclusions has been placed in the Library. We made important progress across a range of issues, chiefly that of enlargement, to which I shall return in a moment. Those issues also included agreeing the European Union's first ever sustainable development strategy, which focuses on climate change, public health, food safety, poverty and transport congestion—issues that are important to our economic development.

The sustainable development strategy was led by the Swedish presidency and, as someone who has now observed eight or nine presidencies—all of which have been brilliant—I particularly commend the Swedish presidency for the way in which it has conducted, and continues to conduct, itself, over its six months in office.

The Council endorsed the work that the Swedish presidency has done to advance the European security and defence policy, including work on military capabilities, conflict prevention and the civilian aspects of crisis management. The Council called for early agreement on

the European single sky. We shall pursue a range of contacts, including bilateral contacts with Spain, on this and other issues relating to Gibraltar, including the continuation of the Brussels process.

As is customary, the Heads of Government considered important foreign policy developments, including the middle east, Algeria, East Timor and Korea. The appointment of an EU representative based in Macedonia in support of Javier Solana was agreed. The final decision on who that will be is to be made at the General Affairs Council this Monday.

Regrettably, the European Council took place against a backdrop of malicious violence. That raises important issues of security at future EU summits and meetings, and the need for greater co-operation between police forces across the EU. Here in Britain, the police service has wide experience of dealing with public order situations, and knowledge and expertise that may be of use to other member states when planning forthcoming events.

The EU police chiefs' taskforce exists to bring together senior police officers from across the EU to share expertise on common operational issues. We are keen to have an early meeting of this group on that issue. Peaceful protest has a valuable role to play in any democracy, but the travelling circus of violent demonstrators that has accompanied recent high-level international meetings has nothing to do with democracy or, I suggest, the legitimate concerns of voters.

The powers of the EU—yes, they are controversial in some countries; of course we understand that—were conferred on it by treaties agreed unanimously by the democratically elected Governments of all the member states, and implemented in scrupulous accordance with their constitutional procedures. People sometimes complain about the delays in decision making in the EU, particularly in relation to the ratification of conventions and treaties. I think that that is a price worth paying. The EU is a union of nation states, each of which has to get endorsement for fundamental or significant changes to the way in which the EU operates from its own democratically elected representative institutions under its own constitution.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) *rose*—

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife) *rose*—

Mr. Straw: I will give way first to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), then to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell).

Dr. Lewis: Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that that requirement for unanimous endorsement for significant changes applies to the Irish, who have just voted "No" to such a significant change?

Mr. Straw: Of course it does. The Nice treaty requires the endorsement of the 15 member states. I shall come to that in a moment.

Mr. Campbell: What view has the Foreign Secretary formed of the contribution to the debate about Ireland made, apparently, yesterday by Mr. Prodi, who appeared to suggest that the fact that the Irish had voted against ratification in their referendum would not preclude

enlargement? I rather share the view that the right hon. Gentleman has just expressed. What steps will he be taking to ensure that Mr. Prodi properly understands the matter?

Mr. Straw: As the right hon. and learned Gentleman will understand, Mr. Prodi acknowledges that that is a matter for himself.

Let me now deal with the Irish referendum. The Nice treaty requires endorsement by the 15 member states, as does any other intergovernmental treaty. It is technically true that enlargement could take place without the treaty of Nice, but it could not take place without any treaty at all, because accession requires treaty agreement by not only the accession states but the acceding states. So, if enlargement were not achieved through the Nice treaty, it would have to be achieved through a treaty of accession, albeit a simpler one. There is no way of doing that through the current instruments, for understandable reasons: they have been agreed by the 15 signatory states. When there has been an accession in the past under existing treaties, legislation has had to be introduced in this House and in other Parliaments to enable us and the other member states to accede to the accession.

In the General Affairs Council last Monday, we acknowledged the fact of the result of the Irish referendum. We also acknowledged that, although there was a low turnout and many people had complained that they did not understand the issues, that was beside the point. This was a democratic vote that had produced a clear outcome under the Irish constitution.

The GAC resolved that, although we regretted the outcome—which, plainly, we did—we respected it. We unanimously agreed—that included the Irish Foreign Minister—that although the Nice treaty could not be renegotiated, the ratification process would continue in the other member states while the Irish Government sought to find other ways of dealing with their people's concerns. It was decided in the GAC resolution that the 14 other member states would be actively engaged in that process. That parallels the arrangements made when there was a similar result in Denmark in 1992. A similar resolution was agreed at that time by all parties, including the then United Kingdom Government, about that approach.

In digesting the implications of the Irish referendum, all member states accept that none of us can or should take public support for the European Union for granted. That is a matter that we all have to consider. The Gracious Speech made it clear that we should introduce a Bill to ratify the Nice treaty in this Session. The Bill was presented to Parliament yesterday and received its first reading. It will be for Parliament to decide whether Nice is accepted, including the first ever increase in the United Kingdom's voting weight, which is very important for this country.

The House will recall that one of the central purposes of the Nice treaty was to facilitate the enlargement of the European Union. Britain is a champion of enlargement, not just to reunite Europe and heal past divisions, but because of a hard-headed, practical assessment of the benefits that that will bring, including to the British people.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): If Parliament rejects the Bill that the right hon. Gentleman

has introduced to ratify the Nice treaty, is it his intention to go to a future GAC to agree that enlargement should take place nevertheless and that the vote of Parliament should be set aside?

Mr. Straw: No is the answer, but I do not think that that will happen. We shall wait and see.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): There are three different votes on the Tory Front Bench. They are all different.

Mr. Straw: I know that all the candidates for the leadership of the Conservative party and all their supporters have changed their minds, but somewhere in the recesses of my brain, although this could be a case of mistaken identity, I had the information that the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) is generally in favour of Europe and the European Union and its enlargement.

Mr. Quentin Davies: Answer the question.

Mr. Straw: I gave the hon. Gentleman the answer, and it is very straightforward. The answer is no, and I could not have put that in clearer terms. Perhaps it represented friendly fire.

Mr. Davies *rose*—

Mr. Straw: No, no. I must get on. I say to Conservative Members that I have the deepest sympathy for their predicament, because I spent 18 years in opposition.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Well deserved.

Mr. Straw: Yes it was, because that was the verdict of the British people and we have to respect that. However, we also sought to learn from it and understand the error of some of our ways. I recommend that approach to the Conservative party, because, otherwise, Conservative Members will stay where we were and they will be waiting not 18 years, but a great deal longer.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: Of course, to another leadership candidate.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on moving across to his present post. There is an important point that I do not want him to gloss over. Will he give us an explanation? During the general election and the run-up to it, the Prime Minister and the then Foreign Secretary, who has found a different job, both said that any failure immediately to ratify the Nice treaty and any renegotiation attempts would lead to all enlargement being put on hold. Today, the right hon. Gentleman has admitted that enlargement could take place regardless of the Nice treaty. He said so earlier; he should look back at his text. Does he accept that what the Prime Minister and the then Foreign Secretary said was a complete fabrication?

Mr. Straw: I know exactly what I said. I did not use those words, and the record will show that clearly. I was

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trying to educate Conservative Members. It is true that a treaty is necessary for enlargement; it is not true in a legal and technical sense that the Nice treaty is necessary for enlargement. We would have to have an alternative treaty. Nice is what is available at the moment.

Mr. Duncan Smith: That is not what the right hon. Gentleman said.

Mr. Straw: With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, that is exactly what I said, and the record will show it. I also say to him that ratifying Nice was always going to take time, because ratification by the institutions of the 15 member states is required.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham) *rose*—

Mr. Straw: Of course ratification will take time. I give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who is not a candidate.

Mr. Maude: I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for giving way on this important point. His predecessor spent the months between the Nice treaty being agreed and the general election saying that our belief that the treaty should be renegotiated would hold up enlargement. The Foreign Secretary is saying today, and the Prime Minister said at Gothenburg, that the Nice treaty is not necessary for enlargement. That is what we have always said. The Foreign Secretary's point is that an accession treaty is needed for enlargement. The Nice treaty is not an accession treaty.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): They will have to do better than that.

Mr. Straw: They will all have to do better than that, as my right hon. Friend says. The Opposition are dancing on the head of a pin. I have given the answer to the question, and I shall give it to Conservative Members again. Yes, technically, accession does not require the treaty of Nice. It does require a treaty, however, but this is the important point, and Opposition Members need to think about it. If we were to agree to another 13 member states joining the EU without changing the way in which the EU's institutions operate, those institutions and the decision-making processes of which Conservative Members complain would collapse, because they would seize up under their own weight.

It was critical at Nice that we not only laid out a pathway to enlargement, but achieved, thanks to the work of my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House, major changes to modernise the EU that are in the interests of the proper functioning of the institutions and of the United Kingdom.

It was also critical to achieve a relative increase in our voting weight inside the Council, an extension of qualified majority voting where that is in our interests, the continuation of the veto—for example, on tax—where QMV is not in our interests and changes to the way in which the Commission operates, so that it can be relatively slimmed down so as better to operate in changed circumstances in which we shall move over time

from 15 member states to 20 or 25 and ultimately, according to the current list, to 28. I hope that that makes the position clear.

To continue on enlargement, at Gothenburg, Heads of Government reaffirmed their irreversible commitment to it. They agreed that the accession negotiations with the applicant countries would continue to gather pace, with the aim of completing negotiations for the first wave of candidate countries in 2002 so that they can participate as EU members in the European parliamentary elections in 2004.

The European Council at Gothenburg was preceded by an EU-US summit and a European Heads of Government dinner with President Bush. The Prime Minister also attended the summit of NATO leaders in Brussels on Wednesday 13 June, at which President Bush was present.

Some say that we have to make a choice between our co-operation with the EU and our alliance with the United States. In our judgment, that is an entirely false choice. The United States remains our closest ally, and by any measure is our single most important partner. Our vital national interests coincide now as much as they ever did, and our strategic partnership in NATO remains fundamental to the national security of both our countries. The point is this, however. The stronger we are in Europe, the stronger our voice is heard in the United States, just as our influence in the EU is buttressed by our close ties with America.

On European security and defence policy, the President of the United States, George W. Bush, made it clear that NATO as well as US-European relations would be strengthened by the initiative, because it will, in turn, help to strengthen European capabilities. In his later speech in Warsaw, the President said:

"We welcome a greater role for the EU in European security, properly integrated with NATO".

On missile defence, the President repeated his undertakings to consult widely with allies and geo-strategic partners.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that specific point?

Mr. Straw: I give way to my hon. Friend, but will come back to the hon. Gentleman.

Jeremy Corbyn: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment. He referred to national missile defence. Does he accept that NMD undermines all the nuclear disarmament treaties of the past 40 years? Would it not be far better if Britain were to use its position of some influence over the United States to say that it is a totally unacceptable development that can only lead to an escalation of an arms race around the world, rather than an opportunity for peace?

Mr. Straw: I understand my hon. Friend's concern. I am grateful to him for his congratulations and look forward to having many debates with him, as we had when I was Home Secretary.

Jeremy Corbyn: There will be.

Mr. Straw: I know, and I look forward to them. However, I do not share my hon. Friend's view on this

matter. I am glad that President Bush made it absolutely clear that there is a process of consultation. It is now accepted by all the parties, not only at the Gothenburg summit between the EU and the US but at the NATO Council on Wednesday, where there was an even larger number of member states. The United States has raised its concern, which it believes is shared with the rest of the world, that the strategic threat has changed over the past 30 years. I think—my view is shared by our partners—that we should sit down and engage with the United States about those concerns and the potential solutions to them.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The right hon. Gentleman selectively quoted the President of the United States, but fell into the trap of failing to recognise what he was saying. The right hon. Gentleman said that the EU force—the Euro army or rapid reaction force, whatever one calls it—was fully integrated into NATO. It is not integrated at all. It has separate command structures, separate command headquarters and separate planning. There is no plan to integrate it, and there is no way that anything has been agreed to that extent. He knows that what the American President said was a wish list and is not happening.

Mr. Straw: First, the words that I used were “properly integrated with NATO”, which is different. I chose my words with care—[*Interruption.*] No, those were the words that I used. If the hon. Gentleman wants to have a go at me, I suggest that he quotes me accurately.

Secondly, of course I quoted selectively from the President's speech, because I would have been here for quite some time had I quoted the lot. I had the benefit of listening to every single word of President George W. Bush's address to the NATO Council and I can tell the hon. Gentleman—it is on the record—that he was very supportive of the initiative and recognised the value not only to Europe but to the United States and the alliance.

I have given way a number of times, as is my wont. The price that I pay for that is that I now need to make progress on the remaining issues.

On climate change, there is a clear disagreement between all EU member states and the United States. That was acknowledged in the communiqué. However, the communiqué and the discussions paved the way for dialogue about how to deal with that difference, and secured an important commitment that the US will participate constructively in the climate talks in Bonn.

On trade, the EU and the US reached a joint commitment to launch an ambitious liberalising world trade round at Doha in Qatar in November.

There is no time today for a comprehensive survey of our policies towards the wider world. For example, we have revitalised our efforts to promote trade and inward investment by creating British Trade International, and now by appointing a Minister for Trade, my right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Symons, who reports both to me and to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

Nor is there time to do justice to the range of close relationships that we maintain with key partners such as Japan, China, Russia, India, Canada or Brazil. We have important interests, and are actively promoting them, in vital regions such as Asia and Latin America.

Let me focus on three such regions where we hope that diplomatic efforts will pay dividends: south-east Europe, the middle east and Africa. We have been watching recent developments in Macedonia with grave concern. We are determined that tensions there will not drag the region back into ethnic violence—if that is possible.

Extremists, of whatever affiliation, should be in no doubt about the UK Government's resolve, or that of the EU and NATO. Macedonia's Government of national unity has our wholehearted support and the full backing of the EU and NATO. Discussions last week with my EU and NATO colleagues showed a common determination not to see Macedonia descend into chaos and bloodshed. The chance for a lasting peace is still there. We want to see the inter-ethnic dialogue launched by Macedonia's President succeed.

I commend the great activity by Javier Solana and Lord Robertson in shuttling to and from the region. I intend to review our position on Macedonia next week when I shall visit that area.

The middle east is another area that is suffering the costs of great conflict. It was the main subject of discussion yesterday evening with Kofi Annan, the United Nations Secretary-General. As everybody knows, there have been severe setbacks over the past year and, once again, violence prevails. However, there is no future, no security, in violence.

The Mitchell report shows the way forward. The Palestinians should make a 100 per cent. effort to halt violence from the extremists and Israel should lift the closures of the occupied territories and freeze the building of settlements.

Israel is entitled to its security, both now and in the future, but the only way to achieve it is through peace and that will come only through a political process that implements “land for peace”, brings an end to occupation and allows the emergence of a viable, democratic and peaceful Palestinian state, committed to co-existence with Israel. That may now seem to many a distant prospect, but no other vision for the region offers any lasting hope.

Elsewhere in the middle east, working for peace and stability means continuing to stand up to the threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said:

“Nowhere is the need for action globally greater than in Africa”.

He has made it clear that Africa will be a priority for him personally and for the Government.

Africa's problems are well documented, but there is hope. In Africa itself, more and more Governments are showing the determination to make things better. President Thabo Mbeki, who visited Britain last week, symbolises that African renaissance, just as South Africa symbolises the growth of democratic pluralism. Nigeria, Senegal, Mozambique, Tanzania, Botswana, Mali and Ghana, among others, are now following that path.

We can make a real difference. I pay a great tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development. I greatly admired her work when I was less involved with it as Home Secretary. In the two short weeks in which I have been Foreign Secretary, I have been struck by the degree to which this country's reputation has been enhanced by her indefatigable work around the globe, but particularly in Africa. It has been backed by the additional resources that the Government have put into international development.

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We can make a real difference, and we have proved that in Sierra Leone. Our intervention last year was a clear demonstration of our commitment to peace, stability and freedom. We are now beginning to achieve our objective of rebuilding an effective, democratic state in Sierra Leone.

Military intervention is not, and cannot be, the only policy instrument at our disposal. Effective development assistance is another. Under my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, development assistance to Africa has doubled in the last four years to £600 million. There is generous debt relief; help with democratic reform; action in the United Nations; and a thickening of our bilateral relationships across the continent by expanding our network of posts. This year, we shall open new embassies in Mali and Eritrea.

Last year, no new major conflicts broke out in Africa and there were no successful military coups, but there are palpably no grounds for complacency. We continuously seek to improve our efforts there. This year, for the first time, we are pooling Government resources.

Our new conflict prevention fund for sub-Saharan Africa will bring programme funding together with spending on military operations and peacekeeping in budgets jointly managed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence. That will strengthen the way in which those Departments work together and deliver more effective British interventions overseas. It will allow us to focus on regional priorities, such as developing African capacity for peacekeeping and ensuring that valuable natural resources, such as diamonds and oil, are used to fuel prosperity, not conflict. Our policies will work best when we work in genuine partnership with African Governments, who in turn show a genuine commitment to improving the lot of their people.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): So far, the right hon. Gentleman has not mentioned the problem of AIDS, the epidemic of which is threatening economic development throughout Africa. May we have an absolute assurance from him, as I constantly try to get from the Secretary of State for International Development, that we will put a maximum amount of funds into education and condom supply in Africa, and pursue research on a vaccine for AIDS?

Mr. Straw: I assure the hon. Lady that we recognise the huge significance and devastating effect of HIV-AIDS across Africa and in other countries. I am unable to commit myself now to specific sums, but we regard the problem as a high priority.

I began by saying that events overseas have an ever greater impact on the daily lives of the British people. That is probably more true of the United Kingdom than of most countries. Isolationist policies have rarely benefited any nation, least of all a country such as Britain which has long earned its living from global contact.

It may be worth the Conservative party contemplating the fact that when it has fallen into the pit—as it did in the early part of the 19th century and again towards the end—the cause of division was tension between isolationist and integrationist policies.

We export more per capita than the United States or Japan. We are the fourth largest trading nation in the world, the fifth largest economy, the second largest investor abroad and the second largest home for foreign investment. The British people are travelling overseas more and more—53 million overseas trips last year alone, which is one overseas trip for almost every man, woman and child in the population. We benefit hugely from belonging to the world's most influential networks: NATO, the United Nations Security Council, the G8, the Commonwealth and the European Union. We derive practical benefits from a foreign policy that engages actively with all of them.

We will continue to meet the challenge of global change by building alliances and forging common goals with those who share our outlook, interests and values. In our second term of office, we will continue to deploy an active and engaged foreign policy to underpin the tolerant, secure and prosperous Britain that we were elected to build here at home.

10.12 am

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): I apologise to you, Mr. Speaker, and to the House, as I shall not be present for the winding-up speeches. Two of my daughters are being confirmed later today, and my absence would be regretted elsewhere. I have told the Foreign Secretary and understand that he will also not be present, although for a different reason.

I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on his appointment and welcome the entirety of his new Foreign Office team. It is almost unprecedented for there to be such a comprehensive clear-out and replacement of a ministerial team in a Department without a change of Government. There has been some recycling, which is environmentally friendly. We particularly welcome back the hon. Member for Neath (Peter Hain) as Minister for Europe. We rated him rather highly. We did not always agree with him when he was previously in the ministerial team, but he was forthright—I suspect that for the right hon. Gentleman's predecessor he was sometimes uncomfortably forthright on African matters, especially on Zimbabwe. We hope that he will continue to be forthright on other matters. I commend him on the seriousness and thoughtfulness with which he approached his duties then, and we hope that that will continue.

I wish the new ministerial team well. I know from the brief 12 months that I spent as a Foreign Office Minister some 12 years ago—

Mr. Straw: When you signed the Maastricht treaty.

Mr. Maude: No, that was in a later incarnation. As a Foreign Office Minister, I had the most demanding but absorbing time.

The new ministerial team will be served by the finest diplomatic service in the world; it is a Rolls-Royce service. I should like to take this opportunity to express the debt of gratitude that we all owe to the diplomatic service. We should never forget that its work is always onerous and demanding, and sometimes dangerous.

The diplomatic service is a Rolls-Royce service, but Rolls-Royces need good drivers. I do not want to disrupt the even tenor of today's debate by making remarks about the Foreign Secretary's predecessor, but it is fair to say

that Britain's standing in the world was not enhanced by his predecessor's conduct of this crucial role. *[Interruption.]* The Foreign Secretary is getting into dangerous territory by parading his driving licence, given certain events during the last Parliament involving speed limits. I admit that he was not driving at the time, but he should not get himself into that hole.

We hope that this ministerial team will mark a clean break with the past four years, and will take a broader, more confident view of Britain's place in the world. I was interested to hear the Foreign Secretary talk about Britain's place at the centre of a series of interlocking networks—I have used that phrase myself many times. I regret that people sometimes talk about Britain as if we were on the edge. We are not on the edge of anything: we are at the centre of a range of interlocking, overlapping networks. Britain can and should be at the centre of an increasingly interconnected world. That is a source of great strength. Britain can count for something in the world. We do not have to feel that we need to take shelter in an increasingly integrated, common European foreign policy. We should be confident about Britain's role as an independent nation state.

I hope that this Foreign Secretary will take as his first objective the restoration of Britain's standing in the world. I hope that it will not be thought overly partisan if I say that it was a mistake for his predecessor to make so much play of the ethical dimension that he claimed to bring to Britain's foreign policy. It was a mistake, not because we are against ethics in foreign policy but rather the reverse. Britain's foreign policy should have more than an ethical dimension: it should be entirely ethical.

Few Foreign Secretaries in the past would maintain that their foreign policy was anything but ethical. The idea that a foreign policy has a dimension that is ethical and everything else can be unethical is absurd. At its best, Britain has always pursued an ethical foreign policy, and it should not be necessary for a Foreign Secretary to brag about that. It invited ridicule and criticism when the previous Foreign Secretary seemed to apply different criteria and treatment to different countries and Governments on the basis not of their relative conduct but of their size and power. The Minister for Europe, when he was previously in the Foreign Office, described the phrase "ethical dimension" as a hook on which we found ourselves. I hope that the new Foreign Secretary will detach himself as quickly and elegantly as he can from that hook and consign it to the memory hole, to use the Minister of Europe's less elegant phrase—if I have quoted him correctly.

Dr. Tonge: Is the right hon. Gentleman really suggesting that the previous Conservative Government had an ethical foreign policy? The Scott report did not think so.

Mr. Maude: Yes, I would certainly argue that. The proposition that Lord Hurd and Sir Malcolm Rifkind were pursuing an unethical foreign policy is absurd. I doubt whether any Foreign Secretary in the history of this country would claim with hindsight that he had never made any mistakes. It is certainly unlikely that the right hon. Gentleman's immediate predecessor could make such a claim. The hon. Lady's suggestion that a Conservative Foreign Secretary was deliberately pursuing an unethical foreign policy is absurd and offensive.

We should hear less about an ethical dimension and more about a foreign policy that is ethical—of course, it should be ethical—but which represents Britain's interests and stands up for Britain in the world.

I hope that the new Foreign Secretary will rehabilitate the Foreign Office. It has been sadly diminished during the past four years. More and more matters that were under its aegis have been taken away. Envoys have been appointed by the Prime Minister apparently accountable to no one, and have been conducting much of Britain's diplomatic efforts—I am thinking of Lord Levy in the middle east. There has been no accountability to Parliament, not even through any Minister. I hope that the Foreign Secretary will do something to restore the Foreign Office's ability to be at the centre of Britain's diplomatic effort. The weight on his shoulders is very great, and expectations should be high. We will watch with interest, and scrutinise carefully what he does.

I welcome early indications that the Government propose to take the Commonwealth rather more seriously than they have in the past. A year ago, we launched a commission to investigate ways of maximising its potential. The commission, chaired by Mr. Algy Cluff, reported earlier this year. Its most important conclusion was that the Commonwealth needed to increase its powers to discipline wayward members.

I am delighted that steps are being taken to expand the work and broaden the remit of the Commonwealth ministerial action group. I hope that that will enable the Commonwealth to adopt more robust measures in relation to countries such as Zimbabwe—about which I shall say more later—where millions are fleeing their homes and the infrastructure is on the brink of collapse.

I also welcome the emphasis that the Foreign Secretary placed on international development. It was odd that during the previous Parliament no time, or very little time, was allocated to debate that subject, although a Bill was produced towards the end of the Session. We would like the opportunity to debate such issues more regularly.

Of course everyone wants to see a world free of poverty. We all want children to grow up, wherever they may be, with basic living standards and with access to education and primary health care. In particular, we want children to be free from involvement in violent conflict. We all recognise the reality of abject poverty, and accept that Britain can play a role in helping to raise living standards for those in some of the world's poorest countries.

I think that Members on both sides of the House also recognise that real improvements depend on the existence of a proper framework of responsible government and the rule of law in the countries involved. Increasingly, in today's highly interconnected, globalising world economy, countries can choose whether to succeed or fail. A country that chooses to have the rule of law and an open economy will, by and large, succeed, in the absence of massive natural disasters; but a country that eschews the rule of law that protects investment and human rights, or rejects the open economy, will fail. Much of the ability of poor countries to raise themselves up and improve the conditions of their people rests with the Governments of those countries. Of course we can help, and we should help; but the issue of governance is crucial. Britain, with its ancient history of a living rule of law and its

[Mr. Maude]

understanding of how institutions can be developed and maintained, can have a real role in promoting that, and I hope that the Government will take the matter seriously.

There is, of course, a role for financial and development aid. We support that role, and hope that it can be maximised. We hope that the contribution and partnership of individuals, charities and other non-governmental organisations can be enhanced, and welcome the impressive work already being done through British development charities, large and small.

We would like to see some reform of the international institutions, to make them more effective and accountable. We regret that no decisive action has been taken to bring about real reform of the European Union's aid programme, which has been robustly criticised by both the Secretary of State for International Development and Commissioner Chris Patten. Everyone who deals with it says that it is bureaucratic and immensely slow, tending to deliver after the problem has been dealt with. It is a creaking, not very good organisation. In the absence of serious reform to improve its operation, we would like a big slab of our development effort—currently channelled through the European Union—to be undertaken bilaterally by the British Government, either directly or, we would hope, through NGOs and in partnership. That is a better way of doing the job.

The contribution of direct financial and development aid will remain important, but I hope we also recognise that the greatest contribution we can make to the elimination of global poverty is a complete and unequivocal commitment to the creation of global free trade. There is no doubt that free trade and globalisation help the rich, but they also help the poorest, and they help the poorest disproportionately. It is cant and nonsense for those in rich western countries to go on about how we should give more development aid to poorer countries, while keeping their markets closed to products that poorer developing countries can provide and sell. We should open up our markets.

Jeremy Corbyn: The right hon. Gentleman asserts that globalisation of trade is raising the living standards of the poorest in the world. Does he not recognise that the gap between the richest and the poorest is the biggest it has ever been, and is widening? Living standards are falling in much of sub-Saharan Africa and in parts of south Asia, and unemployment is rising in many of those areas. Is the right hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that the free market is benefiting the very poorest in the poorest countries in the world?

Mr. Maude: The countries to which the hon. Gentleman refers, where living standards are falling, have not established the framework of the rule of law and an open economy. That is not the fault of the people; it is the fault of bad Governments and bad leaders. It is precisely because they have denied themselves the benefits of globalisation and free trade that they are suffering. This is not a matter of controversy, at least between those on the two Front Benches. I have certainly heard the Secretary of State for International Development describe increased free trade as the biggest single factor that can help poorer countries, and she is absolutely right.

Those who want a specific example of a fantastic country that has much going for it but is suffering and going backwards at a desperate rate—not because of globalisation, but because of bad government—need look no further than Zimbabwe, which I have visited twice in the past year. It is a painful lesson that the gap between success and failure in any country is very narrow, and can be easily eradicated by the actions of the country's Government.

What is happening in Zimbabwe has nothing to do with international financial institutions, multinational companies, international bond markets or any of the other great demons of globalisation. It has to do with the actions of one man, who happens to be the country's President and who is laying waste to that country, and has declared war on his own people. That is what is bringing Zimbabwe to its knees. Britain should stand robustly against what that man is doing. Zimbabwe's neighbours should also stand robustly against what he is doing, because it is infecting and contaminating the whole of southern Africa.

I agree with the Foreign Secretary that there is much that is encouraging, particularly in southern Africa. Some countries have made the transition to pluralist, multi-party democracy, and are embracing the open economy and beginning to flourish. Things are not perfect—there is a huge amount to be done—but those countries are taking the necessary steps. Meanwhile Zimbabwe, almost at the centre of southern Africa, is a hideous abscess, contaminating and infecting all the surrounding countries. Britain has an obligation to help, and to support the overwhelming majority of people in Zimbabwe who want to do the right things. President Mbeki was here last week. I hope that the Foreign Secretary encouraged him to move a little away from quiet diplomacy to more robust diplomacy. South Africa itself—we all know it; the Minister for Europe knows it better than most—is suffering badly from the contamination that is emerging from Zimbabwe.

When I went to Zimbabwe, I met not only senior members of the Opposition there but people supporting the civic institutions, who are desperately fighting to retain the protection of the rule of law. They deserve our support; they are very brave people. Conservative Members may think that we have had a terrible reverse—we have lost an election in the past month—but we do not go around in fear of our lives, being threatened and beaten, as politicians do there. Sometimes it may have felt a bit like it, but the worst we get is some ridicule and a bit of abuse. We lost the election but we are still alive and free, whereas those people in Zimbabwe go in daily fear of their lives. They are very brave, fine people and they deserve our support.

We think that the time has come for robust action in relation to the Mugabe regime. It would be intolerable if, when the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting happens in the autumn, Mr. Mugabe were able to be there, with all the red carpet treatment that is accorded to a head of state mingling with respected and distinguished world leaders, and to enjoy the benefits of the propaganda coup that it would afford him. People in Zimbabwe have not forgotten how relentlessly he and his machine milked the propaganda benefits of being received a few months ago by President Chirac and the Belgian Prime Minister, so I hope that the Foreign Secretary will at some stage have something to say about the action that the Commonwealth

can take to ensure that Mr. Mugabe does not continue to enjoy the cloak of respectability that is cast upon him by continuing membership of the Commonwealth. When the Commonwealth ministerial action group visits Zimbabwe, which Mr. Mugabe eventually agreed should happen, I hope that he will do all he can to ensure that it has the fullest access to people who will have some revealing things to say about what has been going on there.

The Foreign Secretary talked about the middle east. I agreed with much of what he said. There has never been a more important time for Britain to be involved in the pursuit of peace in the middle east. Prime Minister Sharon has been strongly resisting the vigorous calls to abandon the truce and launch all-out war on the Palestinians. It is essential that he does so. We should all urge him to pursue dialogue above violence and we should all urge the Palestinian extremists to seek a peaceful resolution of their grievances. The Foreign Secretary put it well when he said that the continued security and existence of Israel, to which it is entitled and which we all support, depend on there being a durable peace, but it takes two sides to make concessions.

There has been a huge narrowing of the gap. When I was in Jerusalem in January, I met Faisal Husseini, an eminent Palestinian, now sadly dead. He said something very revealing. Ten years ago, he said, he could not have physically brought himself to say the word "Israel". He could not have made it pass his lips. Ten years ago, Palestinians were insisting that all the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean must be Palestinian. Ten years ago, the Israelis were claiming the same for Israel. Now that gap has hugely narrowed. Of course, the matters left to be resolved are the most difficult, but they have to be resolved. I think that enough people on both sides now see that the benefits of peace—the prize of the final process—are so big that it is worth making concessions.

The Foreign Secretary understandably dwelt on Europe a great deal. My party is criticised for being obsessed with Europe, but he devoted an extraordinary amount of time to it. He did not talk about the Indian sub-continent. Some recent developments in relations between India and Pakistan lend some hope—there has been hope before but I hope that it is real this time—of finding a resolution to the violent stalemate in Kashmir. I hope that the whole House will welcome the proposed dialogue between Prime Minister Vajpayee and General Musharraf. I hope that those talks will act as a precursor to an expansion in the relationship between the two countries, which will be beneficial to both sides.

Britain has a role. We are, and should be, friends with both countries. We have, I hope, some influence with both countries. We cannot make things happen there, but we can act to facilitate. I hope that we will be ready to do so. I hope that the new Foreign Secretary will adopt a slightly more delicate approach to these matters than his predecessor did at the beginning of his term—there are still rumblings following his slightly clumsy handling of these matters in his visit to India in 1997. I am approaching this in a non-partisan way, but it did not show the previous Foreign Secretary at his diplomatic best. That might be giving the wrong idea—perhaps it was his diplomatic best, but it was not a good outcome for Britain or for relations between those two countries.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: I do not necessarily agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the conduct or

qualities of the previous Foreign Secretary, but I agree with his view about the need for Britain to offer such help as both parties might jointly ask for in relation to Kashmir. However, does he right hon. Gentleman share my unease that it is no longer General Musharraf, but President Musharraf? If we are concerned about the legitimacy of the presence of particular individuals and the representation of particular countries of the Commonwealth at Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings, there must be a sharp issue in relation to Pakistan.

Mr. Maude: There is. The whole House will be deeply concerned that General Musharraf has unilaterally assumed the presidency. It may have serious implications for the stability of the country and, obviously, for democracy in Pakistan. We should use what influence we have to encourage him to do what he said he was going to do: to hold proper democratic elections at the earliest opportunity. Of course there are implications for Pakistan's membership of the Commonwealth, currently suspended under what are ironically called the Harare rules, but I hope that Britain will seriously engage with General Musharraf to urge him to introduce a clear, timetabled process towards elections.

Everyone will have been profoundly shocked and saddened by the terrible news from Nepal. I am sure that the whole House would want to express its sorrow to the Nepalese people over the dreadful massacre of much of the royal family. King Birendra was greatly respected and played a large part in bringing democracy to Nepal. It is important that his death does not lead to further disruption in a country already troubled by a Maoist uprising. I hope that Britain, based on its historic links with the kingdom, which are embodied in the Gurkhas, will be at the forefront of efforts to help the Nepalese Government at this difficult time.

Closer to home, the Foreign Secretary talked about the Balkans. It is worrying to hear about the breakdown in peace talks there. I hope that they will be resurrected substantively. A durable ceasefire, an agreement between all the parties in the coalition, and an agreement by the armed extremists that they will proceed towards disarmament are essential precursors to peace.

The Kosovar Albanians should be doing everything they can to ensure that ethnic Albanians end their terrorist activities in Macedonia. I believe that we should be quite unequivocal in our support for the Government of Macedonia. They are a democratic and legitimate Government who are doing a great deal to protect the interests of the Albanian majority.

I hope that the Foreign Secretary and his new team will take a much more hands-on approach to the Balkans than did his predecessor and the previous Minister for Europe. The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Swansea, East (Donald Anderson), had some lacerating criticisms to make of the lack of hands-on contact. That approach, and particularly the failure of the previous Minister for Europe to visit the area at all, is very worrying. There is a concern that politicians lost interest in the region when the conflict was over, the aeroplanes had returned to base and the television cameras had left. That will not do.

Mr. Straw: I am going there next week.

Mr. Maude: That is great; I commend the new Foreign Secretary for doing it.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Denis MacShane): I am going too.

Mr. Maude: That is excellent. It is delightful that all that will be happening and that Ministers have been so swift to respond to my blandishments and encouragement to take the issue seriously. However, I also urge Ministers to ensure that that is not a one-off visit; continuing engagement in the region is crucial.

I think that the west has failed the people of the Balkans in a big way. We won the war but have not won the peace, which is very unstable indeed. As for serious discussion on a potential final settlement, there is concern that there has been only a vacuum. One does not have to say that a final settlement will be put in place next week, next month, next year or even in the next few years, but a sense of the potential final dispositions must start emerging. If such a prospect is not offered to those in the region who have a legitimate desire for self-determination, they will feel that it is legitimate to fight for it. However, it is not legitimate to fight for it, and they must be discouraged from doing so.

It is therefore important to work towards establishing some outlines of a potential final settlement. However, such a settlement will have to emerge from the international community as one will not spring up spontaneously in the Balkans. Britain should be playing a seminal and central role in that process.

Finally and briefly, I turn to Europe. Obviously, 7 June was a significant political date not only for voters in the United Kingdom but for citizens in the Irish Republic, who had the opportunity to express their views in a referendum on the treaty of Nice, which they decided pretty unequivocally to reject. I hope that that vote will give the Foreign Secretary and his colleagues pause for thought. Ireland is one of Europe's greatest success stories and one of Europe's most flourishing economies. Over time, it has also been one of the European Union's great financial beneficiaries. Yet the citizens of the Irish Republic said no to what is effectively another integrationist treaty. I hope that Ministers will take note of that judgment and not casually brush it aside.

I wonder why the Government are pressing ahead so rapidly with ratification of the Nice treaty when the Irish have made their disapproval so clear. I recollect—I was not in Parliament at the time; I was on my sabbatical—that in 1992 when the Danish people rejected the Maastricht treaty, the then Labour Front-Bench team strongly urged the then Government not to proceed precipitately with a Bill to ratify the Maastricht treaty. They said that the right thing was to delay that treaty until completion of all the renegotiations needed to secure Danish consent to it. I therefore hope that the Foreign Secretary and his colleagues will look back at what they said then. As the Foreign Secretary said today, the circumstances surrounding the two treaties are very comparable. I urge Ministers now to adopt a similar approach to the one they were recommending then.

When an electorate such as the Irish electorate express their view on the specific issue of the Nice treaty, the political elites should not casually brush it aside as if it

does not matter. It is very important that public opinion and public support for the European Union should remain high, and it is important that Britain should be actively engaged in the European Union. It is alarming that there is evidence of some growth in antagonism in this country towards the European Union. *[Interruption.]* The one thing that could fuel that root-and-branch antagonism is a sense that politicians are ignoring legitimate public concerns about the direction of integration.

The Foreign Secretary laughs at that because he does not think it matters. He claims to be concerned about antagonism to the European Union, but it is precisely the idea that senior politicians regard electors' views on the issue as a matter of no concern that is fuelling that antagonism. It is a real concern. I hope that the Foreign Secretary will not simply say, "It is just Ireland and does not really matter. We are going to blast ahead and continue." That would be the worst possible signal that he could send. I hope that he will think again about the approach that the Government are taking.

It is clear both from the Prime Minister's comments at Gothenburg and from the Foreign Secretary's comments today that the Nice treaty is not essential for enlargement. However, in the weeks and months before the previous general election, the Foreign Secretary's predecessor consistently told the House that Conservative Members wanted to stop enlargement because they were against the Nice treaty. Suddenly, all that has changed. Now Ministers are saying that they really did not mean that and that the treaty is not necessary for enlargement. Today, the Foreign Secretary said that the treaty is simply desirable. We can argue about whether it is desirable. A reweighting of votes, for example, will have to happen eventually, but the Nice treaty is not essential for enlargement.

Enlargement should proceed. I hope that the Foreign Secretary and the Government will make it absolutely clear that enlargement will proceed even if there is a continuing problem with Irish ratification of the Nice treaty—there may well be; no one should assume that that electorate will return to the issue and everything will be fine—or a problem with implementation of the treaty. Enlargement should, if anything, be accelerated. Our view is that the Nice treaty will hold back enlargement. We rather agree with the current Prime Minister's comments, made back in 1995, that reform of the common agricultural policy is essential for enlargement to happen. That reform has not happened and is the biggest roadblock to enlargement. It needs to be dealt with now.

We look forward to engaging with the new Minister for Europe on all the European issues. He has, with his customary forthrightness, been very open about his views, and that is a good thing. I do not want to discourage him by dwelling on some of his previous comments because I think it is important that politicians should be able to say what they think without there being lots of gloating afterwards and comments such as, "Look at what you said then. Isn't it inconsistent with what you stand for now?" Nevertheless, I hope that he continues to take the view that the European Union should be democratised and decentralised, as that is precisely our view.

The constant process of centralisation in treaties such as the Nice treaty is harming the European Union. By extending qualified majority voting, such treaties are taking ever more decisions to the centre. No other international organisation believes that more

centralisation is the answer. Indeed, all other such organisations are talking about creating multi-centred institutions and decentralisation, creating modern network organisations. The European Union is the only institution whose political leaders still seem to believe that centralisation is the answer. Therefore, as I said, I hope that the new Minister for Europe will continue to be forthright in making the case for decentralising the European Union. We think that that is the right way to go.

Again, I wish the Foreign Secretary and his new team well. They have a very important role, and the eyes of the country will be upon them. We believe that there is the possibility for Britain again to count for something in the world, by standing up for the important values of decency, the rule of law, an open economy and democracy. There is no point prating about human rights unless we are serious about the rule of law, because that is what protects those rights. This country and this Government can stand up for that, but they need to do so in a confident way, not fearful that Britain does not count for enough and must take shelter in an ever more centralised European Union. We hope that the Foreign Secretary will share our confidence that Britain really can count for something in the world.

10.50 am

Ann Taylor (Dewsbury): I do not want to follow the shadow Foreign Secretary on his world tour, but the point in his speech that I will remember is his claim that the Conservative Government of the 1990s had an ethical foreign policy. If he maintains that claim, he will merely prove that the Conservative party has learned nothing from the past and has a very long way to go before it begins its recovery.

I do not normally take part in foreign affairs debates—or in any debates, as I have been silent for the past three years. This is not an area in which I specialise, and although foreign affairs may be the focus of this debate, it can encompass the Queen's Speech as a whole, so my comments will be wide ranging—as, I suspect, will be those of some of my colleagues.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his new appointment as Foreign Secretary. He and I have worked closely together over the years. One bonus of his transferring to his new post is that he will no longer be knocking at the door of business managers and asking for legislation almost every other week—and usually getting it, I might add, but, as he would be quick to point out, usually delivering his side of the bargain as well. I am sure that he will enjoy his new role and that we can have every confidence in him.

I was glad that my right hon. Friend emphasised the relevance of foreign affairs to ordinary people. Many people, and especially younger people, realise that many of the problems that we face have to be tackled internationally. Many people are extremely worried about President Bush's recent statements on the environment, and other issues include drugs and international crime. My right hon. Friend was right to draw our attention to the fact that many people are directly affected by such issues and are entitled to be concerned about them.

I share my right hon. Friend's attitude towards Europe, probably going back to the 1970s, but also in its development, shall we say. I accept his definition of himself as a practical European, and would also apply it

to myself, not least because many of my constituents know that their jobs depend on our membership of the European Community. They are not short-sighted on these issues and do not take an isolationist approach.

My constituents and, I am sure, those of other hon. Members are concerned about international development. While the general election was rather low key, it was striking that those who raised issues did so in a serious way, and the Labour Government's action on third world debt earned us a great deal of recognition and support, because many people in this country can think beyond these shores and consider other people. I hope that we can maintain our record on that.

There are one or two other issues that I hope my right hon. Friend will consider in his period in office, which I hope will be a long one.

Mr. Straw: Hear, hear.

Ann Taylor: I am glad that we agree on that.

Because of his experience at the Home Office, my right hon. Friend will be aware of the issue of the entry clearance system for those wanting to come to the United Kingdom. I know from constituency cases, as he will, that although there has been improvement in the system, especially since the very welcome abolition of the primary purpose rule, there are still inconsistencies in how different posts approach different cases. I am sure that, with his constituency knowledge, he will be able to encourage best practice throughout the posts.

I hope that my right hon. Friend will also consider how to end the way in which less reputable so-called immigration advisers charge people for what is often useless advice, especially in the Indian sub-continent, but also here. Many people get ripped off and are charged for straightforward applications or, perhaps worse, for pursuing what are bound to be hopeless cases. We could do more to bear down on such practices.

The shadow Foreign Secretary touched on the issue of Kashmir. Many of my constituents have a close interest in what is happening there. Many families in Dewsbury have relatives who have been badly affected by the conflict. There are many Pakistani and Kashmiri families, but also many who have relatives in the Indian army. He acknowledged that we in Britain cannot solve the problem but, given our historic role, we can use our good offices to try to ensure that there is a dialogue and that we do not lose any opportunity to make progress, which looks possible at the moment. I hope that, if my right hon. Friend visits the Indian sub-continent, he will raise that issue whenever appropriate, as well as in international forums such as the United Nations.

Over the past couple of days, I have listened to a great deal of the debate on the Queen's Speech and I have been tempted to intervene on several occasions, not least when modernisation of the House, programming and the role of Back Benchers have been discussed. My contributions on that will have to wait for another occasion, or I will speak at too great length and not get the chance to touch on the other subject that I want to mention today: the improvement in public services, which was an important part of our election manifesto and is one of the reasons why we were re-elected with such a significant majority.

I am very proud of what the Labour Government achieved between 1997 and 2001 in education, and especially the Sure Start system, which will give some

[Ann Taylor]

young children life chances way beyond what they might otherwise have expected. I am very pleased that we were able to provide nursery education for every four-year-old, and look forward to our being able to extend that to three-year-olds. I was pleased, too, that we could deliver on our pledge on class sizes in infant schools. There is now no child of infant school age in Dewsbury in a class of over 30, and that will inevitably and undoubtedly lead to improvements in their education and their life chances.

However, there is still a great deal to do, as we acknowledged at the election and as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills recognised yesterday. We have rightly said that we will focus on secondary education. It is important that we maintain that momentum, because we must reform and improve individual schools. It is also important for us to maintain a cohesive schools system, as that is the best way of providing real opportunity for every child.

My right hon. Friend yesterday announced an expansion in specialist and beacon schools, and assured the House that it would not lead to a two-tier system. It is vital for us to ensure that it does not do so. That can be achieved by encouraging specialist schools to look outwards and to co-operate with other schools in their areas, rather than to set themselves apart. I am sure that that is possible and that we can build—and, in some areas, rebuild—the community of schools that is necessary to improve the life chances of every child.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned yesterday the important review that she has initiated in respect of the AS-level examinations that were introduced this year. I declare an interest in those examinations, as I have two teenage children, one of whom has just completed A-levels in the traditional way. The other has just completed AS-level examinations. I must say at the outset that the one who did the conventional A-levels wishes that he could have taken the AS-levels, while the one who is doing AS-levels thinks that far too much work is involved, so it is clear that we cannot please all of the people all of the time. My right hon. Friend was right to emphasise the need to broaden post-16 education. The moves that we made in introducing AS-levels were absolutely right, and it is important that we broaden that tier of education.

We have also introduced key skills for first-year sixth-form students, which means that there is an awful lot of work for those who are taking key skills as well as four and sometimes five AS-levels. We must revisit the question of how to ensure that the work load and examination timetable of those young people are appropriate. Many AS-level students have been examined at the end of the year, and not on the modular basis on which some conventional A-levels are currently taken.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will ensure that young people who have taken AS-level examinations this year and who will include the results in their forms for the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service in September or October are not disadvantaged. That could happen if their results for the new examinations are there for all to see, but are not as good as their competitors' predicted A-level grades. Such students may, of course, be competing with youngsters who have not taken AS-level examinations, as some schools and colleges have chosen not to adopt them. We must ensure

that fair consideration is given to all young people who are entering university and that none of them is disadvantaged by taking a broader curriculum. We must also not forget that these are the children who were guinea pigs at the age of seven, when standard assessment tasks were introduced, and so have seen significant changes during their school careers.

We must turn our minds also to the improvements that we could make in AS-levels and post-16 education generally. I think that we should be open-minded about the scope for introducing a credit-accumulation system for examinations, and perhaps about considering the whole 14-to-19 curriculum, not only the 16-to-19 curriculum. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was very positive yesterday in expressing her support for a broad curriculum. I hope that that support will be maintained by the Government, not least because we are now introducing vocational GCSEs. We must ensure parity of esteem for those qualifications, so that they are not seen merely as a qualification that is intended for people who are less academic and will not pass other examinations.

The Government set out an ambitious programme in the Queen's Speech, and it is on the delivery of that programme that we will be judged in the next four years. I believe that if we maintain our pace and direction, especially in issues such as education, we will not only have justified the confidence that people placed in us in the election on 7 June, but have laid the foundation for significant improvements in our education system that will improve the life chances of every child who passes through that system, as well as the economic prosperity of this country. On that basis, we will be laying the foundations for another victory by a Labour Government in four years' time.

11.5 am

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): In the spirit of the day, may I begin by offering my congratulations to the new members of the foreign affairs and defence teams, who are assembled today? I should also like to offer my congratulations to those who have survived the cut—a golfing analogy that my fellow Fife Member of Parliament, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy (Dr. Moonie), who has been restored to the Ministry of Defence, will no doubt understand and appreciate.

When the Minister for Europe was moved from the Foreign Office shortly before the election, I wrote to him to say how sorry I was and to express the hope that he would soon be back. That prediction has proved entirely accurate, but my prediction about the Foreign Secretary whom he might serve was not as well blessed. None the less, I welcome the Foreign Secretary to his responsibilities. He spoke in his opening remarks about the symmetry of the Foreign Office, but I thought that I may have misheard him, and he was talking about the cemetery of the Foreign Office. I am certain that I was wrong; it would have been a rather pessimistic note to strike in his first contribution in his new office to debate in the House of Commons.

I should like to put on record my appreciation of the right hon. Gentleman's predecessor as Foreign Secretary. I do not want to get into partisan exchanges about his achievements or otherwise. I want simply to say this: throughout his occupation of the high and important office

of Foreign Secretary, he behaved towards me with the utmost courtesy. I take some immodest pleasure from the fact that he and I co-operated on a number of projects, not least of which was to produce a document pointing the way for reform of the United Nations in advance of its millennium summit. Substantial parts of that document were contained in the speech made by the Prime Minister at the summit, and I take some comfort from the fact that the Gracious Speech again contains a reference to the Government's commitment to United Nations reform.

I hope that the new regime will not shrink from the ethical dimension. Some time during the previous Parliament, even if the words "ethical dimension" were not replaced, the words "constructive engagement" were suggested as an alternative. I want to suggest that those terms are not mutually inconsistent. I was critical of the Government with regard to the red-carpet treatment that they handed out to Mr. Putin at a time when, in my view, the conduct of the Russians in Chechnya fell a long way below what was justified. It would have been possible to engage with Mr. Putin on issues of common importance, such as European security, while saying all the time, "As long as your record on human rights in Chechnya is so abysmal, you cannot expect to receive all the benefits of a full engagement." To some extent, the Government sold that pass, and one now has to ask what advantage was gained.

There has already been some reference to human rights. I believe that we have an ethical or moral obligation to help others to attain the human rights that we insist upon for ourselves. As the shadow Foreign Secretary hinted, such an attitude is beneficial also to the national interests of the United Kingdom, because repressive Governments who systematically violate the rights of their citizens are more likely to use illegitimate methods in the conduct of international affairs. Countries that promote strong civil liberties are much more likely to provide a conducive environment for business, economic development, investment and trade.

It is no accident that the European Union is based not merely on economic advantage and opportunity, but on an acceptance of democratic values and civil liberties. At least one of the candidate countries anxious to join the EU—Turkey—knows that its chances of being allowed to join depend on a far greater recognition of human rights and civil liberties, and that if it does not attain those standards its chances of accession will be substantially diminished, however economically compatible it may be with the EU.

I suspect that Europe will dominate our debates on foreign affairs for some time to come. I cannot forbear to mention the neat juxtaposition that has brought together the shadow Foreign Secretary and the shadow Defence Secretary, and I am sorry that neither is in his place at the moment. The shadow Foreign Secretary is the man who signed the Maastricht treaty and the shadow Defence Secretary is a man who voted against it. There is talk in the Tory party about the need for a broad church, but I doubt whether the church could be much broader than the now deserted Tory Front Bench.

The Government can count on the support of the Liberal Democrats in the legislation necessary to ensure the swift ratification of the treaty of Nice. The treaty sets out changes to the institutional framework of the EU that will be necessary for enlargement to be successfully undertaken. It is technically possible to enlarge without

using the mechanism of the treaty of Nice, but if we did so every candidate country would gain two Commissioners. A Commission that many people think is already too large would be increased to an unnecessary number of people. More significantly, the achievement in terms of the exercise of Britain's influence that the Government obtained in the treaty of Nice would be lost. We can enlarge the EU without using the treaty of Nice, but we would create a monster if we did, and we would give up a substantial benefit to the people of the UK. That is hardly an argument for setting the treaty of Nice aside and taking some other route to enlargement.

In his speech, the shadow Foreign Secretary made no reference to the issue of qualified majority voting. That was perhaps well advised, because more than half of the extensions to QMV refer to technical portions of the treaty dealing with appointments, rules of procedure and the management of the European Parliament, its committees and courts. That is hardly a case for a referendum. Notably, the shadow Foreign Secretary did not repeat the call for a referendum on the Nice treaty, which was previously part of the Conservatives' position. Perhaps it has been excised from the website, like their manifesto, and should no longer be mentioned.

A further four articles in which QMV is to be extended refer to areas in which Britain opted out—again, no case for a referendum there. The remaining 10 extensions are in areas such as anti-discrimination practice, support for industry, priorities for structural funds and environmental measures. Those do not seem to be of such constitutional importance as to require a referendum. The case for a referendum was not made at the Dispatch Box today by the Opposition and they may, at last, have realised that such a case cannot be successfully argued if one considers the precise terms of the treaty.

Accompanying swift ratification of the treaty by the UK must be an acceptance on both sides of the House that the EU needs to undertake a serious round of reform. It must concentrate its energies on what it does best and not on trying to influence every legislative area of national competence. It should stay clear of areas in which its writ is unnecessary. The intergovernmental conference in 2004 should be used to establish a clear and precise delimitation of competencies between the EU and the nation states on which it relies for its legitimacy.

What we are talking about—I do not shrink from the expression—is a constitution for Europe. It is only through being clear and open about its structures and ambitions that the EU can hope to retain the support of the people of Europe. It is only then that the people of Europe will be comfortable with the institutions that are designed to represent them. We need to know in clear and simple language what the EU can do and what it cannot.

The single currency was the dog that did not bark in the Queen's Speech. As Sherlock Holmes might have observed, it was all the more significant for that, but there have been developments. We are now to adopt a position that is described as one of pro-euro realism. If that is to be the rallying cry, it is unlikely to stir the blood. I cannot envisage the people of Dunfermline, East taking to the streets to chant, "We are the pro-euro realists." Indeed, the Minister for Europe has been quoted as saying that it is necessary to "cool it" when discussing the single currency. Taken together with pro-euro realism, that

[*Mr. Menzies Campbell*]

comment has more than a hint of the deep freeze about it. We are in Lewis Carroll country now, where words mean what those who use them want them to mean.

The five tests are couched in economic language, but they are in substance political. If the Chancellor of the Exchequer came to the Dispatch Box tomorrow and said that all the tests had been met, who would dare to correct him? Joining the single currency is both constitutional and political in its implications, and not simply economic. It is those constitutional and political implications that are the justification for a referendum. If it were simply a matter of economic management, no referendum would be necessary. If it is a political decision, there is an overwhelming need to make the case now, instead of waiting for the relatively restricted period of a referendum campaign. The Liberal Democrats propose to take every opportunity that we can to make the political case for Britain's membership of the single currency, and we would be happy to join in common cause with all who wish to do the same—especially those members of the Conservative party independent enough to reject the five-year principle.

This debate embraces defence, and I welcome back the Secretary of State for Defence and thank him for all the courtesy he displayed to me in the previous Parliament. Such is the cornucopia of talent now available to the Liberal Democrats that I shall not have the pleasure of shadowing him in future. He will be shadowed very effectively by my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch).

I had already read in the papers—and this morning I heard it on the "Today" programme, so it must be true—that the Defence Secretary is to announce the Government's commitment to the two aircraft carriers. I hope that that is so, because the carriers lie at the heart of the expeditionary strategy on which the strategic defence review is based. He will recall that the Liberal Democrats supported that strategy and the conclusions of the defence review, and we will certainly support any announcement he makes that embodies a commitment to the two carriers. Without them, the expeditionary strategy would be sunk. We will need to find the funds to provide the carriers, because if we were not to do so, we would need to embark on a further defence review.

Mr. Quentin Davies: On behalf of the Opposition, I may say that we absolutely share that point of view. The carriers are essential as the key point of the expeditionary strategy, and real worries exist about the Government's genuine commitment to them. However, does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that there is no point in spending all that money on carriers if we do not have the skilled combat pilots ready, trained and able to fly the necessary aircraft? The fact that we have a deficiency of 125 combat pilots, and only 230 who are combat ready, is an absolute scandal. We will need to know how that issue will be addressed in short order when we have the statement on the carriers.

Mr. Campbell: That contribution stands on its own, rather than as an intervention. I agree with a deal of it, if not necessarily with the tone in which it was couched. Indeed, one must also consider the aircraft that will go on the carriers, as well as the carriers themselves. The

Government have committed £1.4 billion to the joint strike fighter programme. The success of that programme and the construction of the carriers go hand in hand. They are essentially two parts of the same whole. If the Defence Secretary is committing the Government once again to the two-carrier programme, I hope that he will also say something about the joint strike fighter and the progress of that programme.

We welcome the fact that an arms export Bill is to be introduced. It is the long overdue implementation of a commitment that the Labour party made in opposition at the time of the Scott inquiry. The Scott inquiry pointed out in sharp terms the fact that arms export legislation was outdated and did not reflect what was necessary or desirable in a modern democracy.

The Labour Government published a White Paper in 1998, and the draft Bill in 2001, but urgent though the issue seemed when Labour was in opposition, it somehow appeared to lose some salience once Labour came into government. I hope that the Bill will be introduced at an early stage. We shall seek to improve it as far as we can to ensure as much openness and transparency as possible in the export regime. We shall look for measures to provide for prior parliamentary scrutiny of selected licence applications. The joint committee of the four Select Committees made some heavyweight recommendations in that regard in the previous Parliament. We shall also insist that the licensing and regulation of arms brokers is properly addressed, and that much greater control is taken of end-user certificates. We shall continue to argue for the ending of export credit guarantee subsidies for arms exports.

We also want the Government to tell us when we will receive the much promised but long delayed Green Paper on mercenaries. We were promised it throughout the previous Parliament, but we have not yet seen it.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): As the right hon. and learned Gentleman is touching on exports, will he say something about his party's general attitude to trade? I do not know whether he was aware of the visible exasperation expressed by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) during the perfectly sensible remarks made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), the shadow Foreign Secretary, about the importance of global free trade and of further liberalisation of trade. Perhaps he could tell us something about his party's attitude to that.

Mr. Campbell: My party was the free trade party at a time when the absence of support for free trade in the Conservative party was responsible for one of those periods in the wilderness that have already been referred to. We remain committed to free trade, but no one who is committed to free trade can fail to have some anxieties about the extent to which multinational corporations, which often have turnovers far in excess of the gross domestic product of many countries, are in a position to avoid their obligations to pay tax or to take responsibility for acts of negligence.

While I am wholly committed to the principle of free trade, I am equally committed to the notion that companies, wherever they are situated, should be obliged to fulfil their legal and ethical obligations. Much of the anxiety that people feel about globalisation, which is

sometimes demonstrated on the streets when international meetings take place, is based on the notion that some companies are so enormous that they are above the law. The shadow Foreign Secretary talked about the need to ensure that civil liberty and the rule of law marched robustly side by side. I agree with that, but if there is the rule of law for individuals, there has to be the rule of law for companies too.

Dr. Tonge: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Campbell: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will make some progress; I know that she takes a close and effective interest in international development.

We welcome the reintroduction of the International Development Bill because we believe that poverty reduction should be at the heart of all Government policies on aid. There was a defect in the previous Bill. Although it was said by implication to bring an end to the notion of tied aid, the Bill contained insufficient measures to make that specific. We hope that in reintroducing the Bill, the Government will make some effort to meet the legitimate criticisms that my hon. Friend made of the Bill during its passage through the House.

I suspect that our dismay was shared by hon. Members on both sides of the House that the Bill fell in the period immediately before the dissolution of Parliament because it could not be given a fair wind by Conservative peers in the upper House. That was curious, because the Bill went through this House on the basis of virtual all-party support—an extraordinary amount of consensus. I cannot remember any debate that was genuinely adversarial. I hope that when the Bill comes back, it will make the swiftest possible passage through this House and the other place to make up for the fact that it was unnecessarily and unduly delayed.

Missile defence is an issue that, in political terms at least, will run and run. I personally remain unconvinced of the case for missile defence. I am unconvinced of the threat assessment on which it is based. As I have said in the House before, the classic analysis of threat takes into account capability plus intent. It is true that the capability to manufacture weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery is already more freely available. However, if one bears it in mind that totalitarian regimes go to a great deal of effort to ensure self-preservation, why should we assume that they would accept the risk of destruction by using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against the United States?

It is right to say that the doctrine of mutually assured destruction has its roots in another period, but that doctrine has at the very least been modified by a number of factors since 1972 and the anti-ballistic missile treaty. NATO has adopted the nuclear doctrine of minimum deterrence, and regards nuclear weapons as weapons of last resort. START 1 and 2 have had an effect on the doctrine of mutually assured destruction. The doctrine has also been modified by the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. I argue strongly that it was further modified by the declaration made last year in New York by the five declared nuclear powers at the NPT review conference. All that suggests to me that there is a structure on which it has been possible to achieve a nuclear balance. Of that structure, the 1972 treaty remains a part.

How can we be so confident that a unilateral United States withdrawal from that treaty would not affect the structure? The structure is based on mutual obligations and interdependence. Unilateral action by the United States would inevitably disturb that structure. I am not alone in believing that.

Some hon. Members seemed to express the view that in the United States there is monolithic support for national missile defence. It will not have escaped the notice of any of us that control of the United States senate has passed from the Republicans to the Democrats. Senator Tom Daschle, the new majority leader, Senator Carl Levin, the new chairman of the armed services committee, and Senator Joseph Biden, the new chairman of the foreign relations committee, have all expressed reservations about NMD, in almost exactly the same terms as I have done today—so there is no monolithic view in the United States.

We ought to have a much wider debate in Britain than we have had until now. It is disingenuous for the Government to say, "Well, they have not asked us, so we have not felt it necessary to make a decision." We know that there is a nuclear planning cell in the Ministry of Defence. What on earth has it been doing for the past 12 months if it has not given consideration to the effect on Britain's nuclear policy if NMD goes ahead?

The unanswered question is always, "What of China?" No one in Britain or the United States has produced an acceptable political solution to the obvious reservations of China and the threat that it might feel compelled to modernise and increase its nuclear arsenal if NMD were to proceed.

Iraq has been mentioned briefly during the debate. There are allegations—perhaps the Defence Secretary will take the opportunity to say something about them—that about 23 deaths were caused in the northern part of Iraq by allied aircraft. That was denied by the Ministry of Defence, but has been put forward with a great deal of vehemence on the Iraqi side. Perhaps the Secretary of State will be able to enlighten the House a little further.

One thing that cannot be denied is that the patrols continue both north and south. Those combat air patrols are not expressly authorised by any United Nations Security Council resolution. If one reads the resolutions that are prayed in aid, one sees that it requires a pretty extended interpretation to suggest that they give authority for what is going on. When the Defence Secretary himself gave evidence to the Defence Committee in the previous Session, his evidence, which I have read in detail, was to a large extent based not on the Security Council resolutions but on the general right of humanitarian intervention. The right hon. Gentleman is a pretty confident fellow, but his evidence on that matter as given to the Defence Committee was pretty thin.

The risk is that one of these days the Iraqis will get lucky. One of these days, the air defence system, which we seem determined to suppress, will be successful; if it is not an American pilot or American air crew, it may well be British air crew who are killed or brought down and taken through the streets of Baghdad as an enormous propaganda opportunity for Saddam Hussein.

We know that the patrols now offer no protection of any kind on the ground in the south. In the north, there are reports of allied pilots finishing patrols and returning

[Mr. Campbell]

to Turkish air bases so as to allow Turkish aircraft to take off to harass the very Kurds who have been under allied protection earlier in the day. We need a wholesale review of policy towards Iraq. As I have said, I do not believe that the patrols can be described as authorised in the way that is claimed. There is considerable suspicion that the purpose of those patrols is not to provide protection but rather to continue the degradation of the air defence system in Iraq. In other circumstances that might be justified, but it is not, in my judgment, made legitimate by the legal instruments that are prayed in aid to support it.

Mr. Quentin Davies: Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman saying that the Liberal Democrats believe that a major concession should be made to Saddam and a tremendous boost to his power and prestige provided, by our unilaterally withdrawing those overflights without him making any concession, without him accepting the latest UN resolution, without him allowing any UN inspectors back, or doing anything about the 600 missing Kuwaitis whom he abducted? Are the Liberal Democrats saying that, without any concession at all, we should simply hand him this enormous gift?

Mr. Campbell: The hon. Gentleman has not been in any middle eastern capitals in recent times. If he had been, he would have both seen and heard the extent to which the policy of the combat air patrols is regarded with distaste and disfavour by Governments in all the middle eastern capitals—[*Interruption.*] I say, if the hon. Gentleman will allow me, that the patrols do not have any legal legitimacy. They are ineffective in the south; indeed, so ineffective are they that reports were emanating from the Ministry of Defence earlier this year that Britain was unilaterally considering withdrawing from the combat air patrols in the south and leaving the United States to get on with it. France has already withdrawn; only the United Kingdom and the United States are engaged in the exercise—

Mr. Davies: The answer is yes.

Mr. Campbell: In relation to those patrols, one of these days the Iraqi air defence system will get lucky.

Mr. Davies: The answer to my question is yes.

Mr. Campbell: No, the answer is not yes. The question cannot be put in the isolationism that the hon. Gentleman finds so convenient. What is necessary is to consider—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry for the hon. Gentleman if these matters require a level of intellectual engagement that he finds difficult and embarrassing. We have to look at the question of Iraq as a whole. In particular, we have to be prepared to accept that 10 or 11 years after the war we are still pursuing the policies that we embarked on a few months after the war. We have to be willing to maintain the threat of military action as part of a policy of containment. If Iraq were to threaten Kuwait again, the hon. Gentleman would not find me slow to say that we should threaten and, if necessary, use military action in order to deal with that threat.

However, one has to look at the wider implications in Arab capitals of the policy to which I have already referred. In particular, one has to look—here I support what the Government have now done—at the question of the maintenance of the non-military sanctions that have resulted, never mind what their objective was, in the degradation of the lives of ordinary Iraqi citizens and have handed to Saddam Hussein an enormous propaganda advantage that he has exploited ruthlessly, not only in Arab capitals but throughout the world.

Along with the United States, the Government appear to be moving, at the United Nations, towards accepting the point of view that the non-military sanctions should be lifted. My view is that the overall policy should be one of military containment accompanied by sanctions on both military and dual-use equipment. The combat air patrols serve no purpose; they are politically damaging and run the risk of casualties among British air crew. That is a pretty compelling reason for bringing them to an end.

I turn to the question of Macedonia. Once again, this is a Balkan state on the edge, it would appear, of civil war. All of us in the House should offer our support and our commendation of the efforts of Lord Robertson, the Secretary General of NATO, and of Javier Solana, as European Union representative, in trying to keep the talks going and in trying to achieve a settlement.

Clearly, the best possible solution would be that the discussions between the Slav and Albanian politicians succeeded, and civil rights and power-sharing reforms were implemented. If such an agreement requires a NATO presence to assist in the process of disarmament, we should most certainly be willing to contribute to that. There is an opportunity for NATO to some extent to redeem our 10-year record in the Balkans, which is not one of which we can be proud. A limited intervention that helped to maintain stability in Macedonia would have the consequence of preventing further regional instability and would also protect the fragile peace in Kosovo and the viability of the NATO mission there as well.

Some reference has been made to the European rapid reaction force. I repeat what I have said on many occasions: neither Britain nor Europe can automatically rely any longer on the United States coming to assist in Europe in conflicts that appear, to US eyes, to be exclusively European and that exclusively affect European interests. The need to ensure that this capability is not a rival to NATO is found first in a formal right of first refusal to NATO, secondly, in ensuring that operational planning remains within NATO and, thirdly, in ensuring that strategic planning remains within NATO.

In an article in the *Financial Times* recently, Mr. Philip Stephens observed rather tellingly that the Europeans can hardly complain of United States unilateralism if they are unwilling to act more coherently in their own defence. I would extend that a little further: we can hardly complain about United States unilateralism if the European members of NATO are unwilling to spend the money necessary to ensure coherence in their own defence.

Foreign affairs outside Europe hardly featured in the general election campaign. The brocard borrowed from the United States, "It's the economy stupid," appeared to rule. However, that does not mean that foreign affairs will not be important. Indeed there are those who argue that one can tell the nature of a Government not so much by

their domestic policy but by the way in which they conduct their affairs outside their own borders. We wish the Government well, but we shall endeavour to maintain the same scrutiny of them in this Parliament and in succeeding Parliaments as we sought to carry out in the past four years. Where their policies are consistent with the best interests of the United Kingdom and meet the legitimate concern of people in this country that we should have an ethical dimension to our foreign policy, they will have our support. Otherwise, we shall be critical where we think that it is necessary.

11.39 am

Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): This has been a good-tempered and constructive debate. I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) and the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on their speeches. That spirit augurs well for debates on foreign affairs during this Parliament.

I looked at the Queen's Speech that was delivered in 1997, after the first major Labour victory, and reflected that one could not learn very much about what happened during that Parliament from it. There were events, such as those in Kosovo, Zimbabwe and Sierra Leone, and they should serve as a corrective for us as we consider the references to foreign affairs in this Queen's Speech. I concede that the references are rather more tightly drawn on this occasion. Perhaps there are fewer grand declarations. However, historians looking back on this Parliament after four or five years will probably find that the Queen's Speech is of limited relevance to what actually happens. Perhaps that should serve as a corrective.

Indeed, looking further back to the beginning of the last major period of Liberal Government—Campbell-Bannerman's great victory in 1906—and then at "The Strange Death of Liberal England" and the women's movement, the trade unions, the first world war and Ireland, we can see that they appeared to be of limited relevance at the time. Perhaps Ireland and the trade unions will figure more largely in this Parliament than we now anticipate. So perhaps there should be an element of reflection at the beginning.

I had the honour in the previous Parliament to chair the Foreign Affairs Committee. We enjoyed the former Foreign Secretary's co-operation. I believe that he attended the Foreign Affairs Committee more frequently than any of his predecessors. I hope that whoever leads the Foreign Affairs Committee in this Parliament will enjoy similar co-operation from the new Foreign Secretary. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) was a distinguished member at the time and pressed us, quite properly, to consider the ethical dimension in foreign policy. Whether it was wise to trumpet one's commitment to an ethical dimension early in a Parliament is a moot point. It might have been more prudent to trumpet that commitment at the end of the Parliament, saying, "By our works ye shall know us." That is a matter for consideration, as many hostages to fortune can be created and perhaps there are lessons to be learned from that.

I was saddened by the extent to which, after very hard work by the Foreign Affairs Committee, many of our reports were almost wholly ignored, even when they were, in my judgment, of great value. We worked in a very

consensual way. Indeed, all our reports, except that on Sierra Leone, were unanimous. I hope that, away from the yah-boo politics of the Chamber, that spirit will continue in this Parliament. Certainly that spirit provides a model, and I thank Opposition Members and my hon. Friends for working together constructively, and I congratulate them on doing so. In particular, I should like to thank my good friend Ted Rowlands, who is no longer a Member. He did a remarkably good job as Chairman of the Quadripartite Committee, which produced excellent reports on transparency and strategic export controls. He will certainly be missed in this Parliament.

I recall a conversation with a leading business man, who told me that he was dismayed that the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Russia received no mention in the press. Sadly, it received no mention because we did not have even one sentence criticising the former Minister for Europe. Alas, that was the flavour of much of the press reporting. I believe that the Committee did well.

I shall make a further point about the Foreign Affairs Committee and Select Committees generally. When there is another very large majority and when the democratic spirit surely demands a well-informed Parliament, ready to ask the Government the right questions, we need to boost the work of Select Committees. I hope that the all-party Liaison Committee report, "Shifting the Balance" and its subsequent reports will be taken very seriously by the new Leader of the House and that the Whips will be less involved in Select Committees than they have been in the past. I hope that there will be an opportunity to deal with that at the start of the Parliament.

Finally on Select Committees, there is a danger that, given the precedent set in 1997, they will not be established possibly until October. In 1997, the Conservative Opposition chose their leader in mid-June, after which the Front Bench shadow appointments were made, so the Committees had time for perhaps one meeting in July before the recess. In my judgment, it would be wrong to delay the appointment of Select Committees until after the Conservative leadership election, given that it might not be over until September. I hope that the usual channels will find a way to ensure that the Committees are up and running, certainly by the end of July, so that they can select their first inquiries. That is a matter of great importance to the House if Select Committees are to carry out their work as speedily as possible.

I shall turn to one or two matters relating to the new Government's policy—first, the European Union. Although the Opposition tried to make Europe a major focus of the election campaign, the electorate, in their wisdom, thought otherwise, perhaps because of the economy or another reason. I ask the Opposition carefully to consider the wise words uttered this week by Lord Hurd—a distinguished diplomat and former Foreign Secretary—who urged them to reject the view that the Europeans are in some way enemies and not to use Europe to frighten people. The Opposition need to have a far more balanced view on the nuances of Europe.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Surely the right hon. Gentleman is setting up an Aunt Sally because the aspect of Europe that featured in the Opposition's unsuccessful election campaign was that of joining the single currency. That was the focus, and the response was that there would be a referendum on the subject. The Government argued

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

successfully that the referendum, not the election, would determine the outcome. He cannot have it both ways and claim that the outcome of the election shows that the electorate rejected the Opposition's policy of opposing the single currency.

Donald Anderson: I refer ~~not~~ just to the campaign, but to the tone of the Opposition during the previous Parliament. As a witness in that, I call Lord Huml, who said that the Opposition should learn that they could

"not gain votes by treating our partners in Europe as enemies, by giving an unbalanced account of what is happening in Europe, and by frightening our citizens at every turn into the unreal fear of a European superstate."

I ask even the hon. Gentleman, whose credentials are well known, to reflect carefully on the former Foreign Secretary's wise words.

On broader European matters, ensuring greater stability in Europe is in all our interests because there are massive threats on the periphery of Europe. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife mentioned Macedonia, and there is instability in Ukraine. Happily, there is now greater stability in Russia.

However, we need to consider other areas of potential instability, which threaten any complacency in Europe. They include north Africa, where there are enormous populations and great poverty. The equivalent of the relationship between the Rio Grande in Mexico and the United States is that of the north of the Maghreb and Europe. As the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife said, we must also consider the sad reversal of Camp David and the enormous dangers that the crisis in the middle east poses to us all.

The result of the Irish referendum on the Nice treaty is significant. The problem with referendums is that one cannot negotiate with the people. There is no national psychiatrist to diagnose the factors that induced the Irish to reject the treaty on a low turnout. There was a motley coalition, which included anti-abortionists, pacifists, those who felt that small nations would get a bad deal from the treaty and others who perhaps simply wanted to kick their Government. President Mitterrand once said that the French always gave the answer to the wrong question in referendums. Events in Denmark show that it will be difficult to determine what amendments, if any, will be enough to change the views of the people of Ireland.

Enlargement is a major factor. A decisive step was taken at the Gothenburg summit, and enlargement must proceed. The Berlin wall fell only 12 years ago. During this Parliament, recasting the map of Europe will begin and stability will spread eastward. Even those who describe themselves as sceptics about Europe, perhaps for the wrong reasons, will accept that, in our new, expanded Europe, there will be more brakes on the train and greater difficulties in reconciling the more diverse countries that will join from central and eastern Europe. However, that is our destiny.

Let us consider our relations with NATO. No one has mentioned the important speech that President Bush made in Warsaw. In the past, we have been uncertain about the US Administration's views about NATO enlargement. We knew that the open-door commitment existed, but there were rumours that, initially, the US was prepared to

open the door only to Slovenia. However, President Bush made a clear commitment in Warsaw recently. He spoke at Warsaw university, and argued that all Europe's new democracies,

"from the Baltic to the Black Sea and all that lie between should have the same chance for security and freedom . . . as Europe's old democracies have."

In a significant passage, he continued:

"I believe in NATO membership for all of Europe's democracies that seek it and are ready to share the responsibilities that NATO brings . . . The question of 'when' may still be up for debate within NATO; the question of 'whether' should not be. As we plan to enlarge NATO, no nation should be used as a pawn in the agendas of others. We will not trade away the fate of free European peoples."

President Bush said that when NATO leaders gather for the Prague summit in 2002,

"The United States will be prepared to make concrete, historic decisions with its allies to advance NATO enlargement."

He called for a Europe that included Ukraine and that was "open" to Russia. Historians will surely find that the Warsaw speech was important.

Some talk about a choice that this country must make between the US and Europe. I believe that, while examples such as Echelon, trade disputes and Airbus can be cited, it is in our interests to maintain the closest relations with our key ally, the US, and with our European partners.

When we consider the rapid reaction force in Europe and what the Americans now call missile defence, some argue that there should be a trade-off between them, and that the Americans will go soft on the rapid reaction force if we in Europe accept their proposals on missile defence. I hope that we will reject that idea and view both proposals on their merits.

If Europe is prepared to pay the price militarily, there is a strong case for a European capacity, as long as it is involved only when NATO does not wish to be engaged. By our active engagement, we can help to develop the rapid reaction force constructively.

I share the enormous misgivings of the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife on missile defence. I also share his happiness that that great democracy, the US, is now holding an internal debate about it because of the changed Senate.

Those of us who have expressed anxiety about the boost to the arms race that may occur because of missile defence or son of star wars can now cite some evidence for our view. China has threatened substantially to increase its intercontinental ballistic missiles. In the past week, President Putin said that he is inclined to increase the warheads on Russian missiles. The arms race could therefore receive a major boost, which would be in the interests neither of the US nor of the world.

Perhaps missile defence can be operational, if at all, only in 10 or 15 years because of technological failures and a greater debate in the US about the financial side. I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence not to jump too quickly into bed with the US on missile defence. We should question the capability and the intention, and share the scepticism of many of our allies. We should not be dragged along by the silken thread of the marketing exercise in which our US allies are now engaged.

The third world has hardly figured in the debate. I want to concentrate on Africa, but I join others who welcome what the Government have said about the new Bill on strategic arms exports. It is tardy; the Scott report appeared in 1996.

I welcome what has been said about a new commitment to the third world. In the cold war, the super-powers had to bid for the support of the African countries, and dictators could walk tall. They knew that they would not be criticised because their votes were needed at the United Nations. Nowadays, we can view Africa more dispassionately, with no post-colonial guilt. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Europe did, we can talk more brutally and realistically to Zimbabwe and other black dictatorships. We can be more realistic about Africa.

We also have to understand that Africa is an area of enormous concern. We must relate to and build up the regional centres in Africa that are capable of supporting their immediate regions. I am thinking particularly of South Africa. I rejoice at the visit last week of President Mbeki, and we must look to South Africa—which has enormous potential—and to the Southern African Development Community region to see the prosperity and the hope of South Africa rippling out to its region and elsewhere.

I suppose that if one can talk of a sceptred isle, one can talk of a sceptred continent. We in Europe have enormous advantages in terms of our stability, prosperity and democracy. In my judgment, it is in our interest to expand those benefits and blessings beyond our immediate shores not only to the periphery of Europe, but to Africa. It is in our interest, but it is also right for us to do so.

11.59 am

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): It is a pleasure, as ever, to follow the right hon. Member for Swansea, East (Donald Anderson). I entirely concur with him on the value of the role played in the previous Parliament by the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, which he chaired with such distinction. I am sure that his voice will continue to carry great weight on matters of foreign affairs in the current Parliament.

I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on his appointment and wish him well in his new responsibilities. He and I have crossed swords for a number of years in the field of home affairs. I know better than most the mixed emotions with which he will have left the Home Office. I look forward to joining issue with him from time to time on the areas of his new responsibility and I hope that my criticisms—when criticisms I make—will be constructive, as I think that they were, on the whole, in the previous Parliament.

There are clearly important differences between the Government and the Conservative party in some aspects of foreign affairs, most notably, of course, in our relations with the rest of the European Union. The Foreign Secretary was quite right to use the phrase “the rest of the European Union” in his speech and he was quite right to dismiss as absurdly irrelevant the categorisations of anti-European and pro-European. He was absolutely right to say that we are part of Europe, but that does not diminish the legitimacy and importance of our engaging in proper debate about the terms on which we engage with the rest of the European Union or about the future course that the European Union should take. I believe that those matters will continue to play an important part in our debates in this Parliament.

On foreign affairs in general, there is no need for there to be—indeed, in an ideal world, there should not be—significant differences across the Floor of the House. Of course, scrutiny of what the Government do is essential, but there need not be and should not be any fundamental differences of approach.

I want to make one other preliminary remark before I pass to my main point. The shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), congratulated the Government on the increased importance that they were attributing to the Commonwealth. However, I was very disappointed that the Foreign Secretary did not really mention the Commonwealth in his speech at all. The word “Commonwealth” passed his lips on only two occasions, unless I am much mistaken, and one of those was when he was describing the title of his office. I was somewhat relieved when he did that, because I had rather thought that, in view of the absence of any substantive discussion of the role of the Commonwealth in his speech, the word might have disappeared from the title of his office. Indeed, I went so far as to check in the front of *Hansard* that he still was the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

I believe that the potential for the Commonwealth to play a much larger and more influential role in world affairs is considerable. I hope that the Government will take seriously that potential and seek to increase the role of the Commonwealth. It can be a force for good on many international issues of importance.

I want to focus on a different area today. For some time now, it has been apparent that the relationship between Europe—I mean Europe and not simply the United Kingdom—and north America is encountering considerable difficulty. I should perhaps declare an interest, in that I have formed and also chair a non-profit making organisation called Atlantic Partnership, which exists to draw attention to the dangers facing this relationship.

The points of friction between the two sides of the Atlantic have emerged with blinding clarity since George W. Bush assumed the presidency of the United States. However, it is a great mistake to suppose that he is responsible for those points of friction. The truth is that the transatlantic relationship that the new President inherited was already under strain.

It is also true that the differences and difficulties had to some extent been shrouded by the ambiguity that was the hallmark of the new President's predecessor and that still finds many echoes on this side of the Atlantic. The tensions on trade, the environment and defence in particular were already present. They are real and they are acute. Of course, what makes them more difficult to resolve is the fact that fundamental changes are taking place, both in north America and in Europe, which, again, could make it ever more difficult in the years that lie ahead to maintain that Atlantic partnership, which has been such a powerful force for good in the world.

What are those underlying forces, which, in my view, are beginning to drive America and Europe apart? Let us start with north America. The extent to which north America is increasingly preoccupied with the Pacific and what lies beyond has become increasingly apparent in recent years. The centre of gravity in north America has increasingly been shifting westward. California is the

[Mr. Michael Howard]

most populous state of the United States. Many of the most significant developments take place on the west coast; silicon valley and Microsoft are both there.

Beyond that coast, across the Pacific ocean, lie lands that matter more and more to north Americans. Japan, despite its recent difficulties, remains an economic giant. For the United States, China is both its greatest opportunity as a marketplace of enormous potential and its greatest threat as a potential super-power in the first half of this century.

The increasing preoccupation with other parts of the globe is reinforced by demographic trends in north America. There are growing numbers of citizens of Asiatic descent in Canada and the United States, and the growing Hispanic population in the United States in particular tends to look south to Mexico and the rest of Latin America beyond, rather than east to Europe.

Those trends are mirrored by some of the forces at work on this side of the Atlantic. The factor that contains the seeds of rivalry to a greater extent than any other is the drive towards European integration. Let me say at once that I recognise that by no means all those who espouse the cause of greater European integration are anti-American, and I accept that it is perfectly possible to desire the creation of a politically united Europe and to want that Europe to remain a partner of the United States, but that is certainly not the view of all European integrationists.

Indeed, it cannot be denied that many on the continent of Europe and some in this country are explicitly motivated by a desire to create in Europe a rival centre of power to the United States. Some of them seem to be keen to use any opportunity that arises to strike a position that is different from that of the United States, often with the only purpose of creating and emphasising that difference. If one adds to that the end of the cold war, which was the cement that held both sides of the Atlantic together in the face of the nuclear threat from the Soviet Union, it is not surprising that differences of view on so many of the great issues facing the world have become more and more marked on both sides of the Atlantic.

Those differences have become so well documented that I do not need to spend a great deal of time itemising them. One of the first to surface related to trade. European attitudes to the import of bananas from the Caribbean and of genetically modified and hormone-treated food from north America have aroused strong reactions in north America, while north America's insistence on promoting the export of the latter to the EU has aroused strong reactions in Europe.

The trading relationship will obviously be difficult to manage. There are legitimate rivalries. Commercial interests differ, and Governments are increasingly called on to assist their own companies. Conflicts are inevitable, but the consequences are grave. In my view, it was not the activities of the demonstrators outside the conference halls of Seattle that caused last year's talks on the next trade round to collapse; it was the failure of the United States and the European Union to agree. Had they been able to agree, I believe that a new trade round would have been established, to the lasting advantage not only of Europe and north America but of the world as a whole. There could be no more striking example of the importance of that relationship to the world at large.

Defence issues have also led to considerable concern. There has been a great deal of debate on the impact on the Atlantic relationship of the European rapid reaction force. I have spoken about this previously and will no doubt do so again, so I do not intend to spend a great deal of time on it today. However, it is worth noting that the Gracious Speech uses language that has often been used by the Prime Minister in this context—it refers to the European Union's ability to act

"where NATO chooses not to do so".

As Conservative Members have pointed out in the past, there is no reference in the appendices to the treaty of Nice that provides a detailed constitution for the European rapid reaction force to limit its ability to act to those situations in which NATO chooses not to do so. Had that language been inserted in those appendices, at least some—although not all—of the concerns of Conservative Members about the development of such a force would have been significantly mitigated.

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats on these matters, laid out three preconditions that he said should be observed if the European rapid reaction force was not to cause some of the difficulties to which I have referred. However, none of those preconditions is met in the language that was agreed at Nice and is set out in the appendices. Moreover, none of them has been met in the structures that have been established so far to take the European rapid reaction force forward. It therefore remains to be seen how it will work out in practice, but the initial omens are not encouraging.

That is not the only element relating to defence that has caused problems for the Atlantic relationship. The United States' plans for its new system of missile defence have undoubtedly led to concerns on this side of the Atlantic. It is perhaps predictable that those on this side of the Atlantic who seek to demonise President Bush conveniently overlook the fact that those plans were supported by the previous US Administration. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife made much of the fact that some of the new chairmen of the relevant committees in the US Senate have reservations about the plans. However, this is not simply a partisan issue in the US—many Democrats support the President's plans. There are clearly considerable concerns over the issue that have yet to be resolved.

The issue that has perhaps led to the noisiest disagreement is that over the way forward on climate change following the Kyoto protocol. Now more than ever, it can be seen how tragic it was that the opportunity for agreement on this issue was missed in the talks in The Hague last November. I have previously paid tribute to the Deputy Prime Minister for the Herculean attempts he made on that occasion to broker an agreement between the US and the EU. As we know, he thought that he had put such an agreement in place, only for it to be rejected at the last minute by his European colleagues. I believe that, had that agreement been allowed to stand, it would have been much more difficult for President Bush to have resiled from the United States commitment to the Kyoto protocol—had he wished, in those circumstances, to do so.

My sympathy with the Deputy Prime Minister is the more marked because I was in a similar position in 1992. At that time, in the run-up to the Earth summit in Rio, it

looked as though the current President's father would not attend that seminal conference because the US was not then prepared to sign either of the two major conventions that would be on the table at Rio—the biodiversity convention and the climate change convention.

I went to Washington as this country's Environment Secretary, without any publicity. I saw all the relevant Cabinet members. I drafted some amendments to the convention with Robert Zoellick, who is the present Administration's trade representative. I reached an agreement that was acceptable to the rest of the European Union. That made it possible for President Bush Sr to attend the Earth summit in Rio, for the United States to sign the climate change convention, and for real progress be made on climate change in the intervening decade—although not as much as many of us would have liked.

At least on climate change, agreement was reached at Gotherburg last week to set up a high-level group, including personal representatives of the European Union and the United States, to continue dialogue on these issues. That seems to me to be the best way forward. However, as we have seen, climate change is not the only issue giving rise to difficulties.

I commend to the Foreign Secretary the possibility of establishing a standing conference of high-level representatives of the European Union and the United States and Canada. That standing conference should anticipate transatlantic disagreements before they arise, identify them in advance and recommend courses of action that would mitigate them. If those issues have already surfaced—as have many that we have been discussing—that standing conference could provide a convenient forum for continuing dialogue.

However difficult the individual issues that give rise to disagreement may be, I believe it is essential that we all keep in mind the overriding importance of sustaining and promoting the Atlantic partnership that has been such a powerful force for good in the world. If it flounders, the planet we inhabit will be a less safe and a less prosperous place. Friction undoubtedly exists, but it must not be allowed to develop into fracture. It behoves us all to do what we can to avert that danger.

12.17 pm

Jim Knight (South Dorset): It is with a great sense of history and responsibility that I speak in the House for the first time as the first Labour Member to be elected at a general election to represent any part of Dorset. Indeed, South Dorset is the first Labour gain from the Conservatives in the area this century, and we look forward to many more such gains, especially in the newly fertile shire counties and in the south-west, where we are still the second largest party.

I take this opportunity to thank the electors of South Dorset again for putting their trust in me to represent them with double the majority of my predecessor. A majority of 153 may not sound much, but I was delighted to get it into three figures.

As a new Member, I am conscious of the need to learn and respect the traditions of the House; at present, it is only too easy to trip over them as I wander confusedly through the corridors full of other Members' offices. I am happy to respect the tradition of paying tribute to my predecessors, the former Members for South Dorset.

I take over from Ian Bruce, who will be known to many in the House, as he served the people of South Dorset for 14 years as their Member of Parliament. Although we have been political opponents for the past six years, Ian and I have always had a good working relationship, co-operating when necessary for the good of the area. He has always been polite and thorough, and I was most grateful to him for the kindness he showed to my late father, who corresponded with him after I came 77 votes short of unseating him in 1997.

Ian was one of a long line of Conservative Members for South Dorset—among them, Viscount Cranborne. That line was punctuated in 1962 by the by-election victory of the late Guy Barnett, who took the seat for Labour when the Tories, strangely, were divided over Europe and managed to put up two candidates. I am confident that Tory divisions on Europe are not a precondition for Labour success in South Dorset, but I would certainly encourage the Conservative party to continue its forthright and entertaining argument for many more years to come.

Sadly, Guy Barnett fell just short of retaining his seat at the 1964 general election, but he is still recalled with great affection in Dorset. He went on to serve as the Member for Greenwich, and I know that senior Members still remember him fondly.

What kind of constituency is the Labour seat of South Dorset that I now proudly represent? The beauty is inspiring and the people are kind and generous, but I remind my right hon. and hon. Friends in Government that appearances must not be allowed to hide the many needs of the area.

The south Dorset coast is the subject of a world heritage status bid. From Brownsea island and Poole harbour in the east, past Studland bay, Swanage sea front and Lulworth cove to the start of Chesil beach and the Fleet at Weymouth and Portland in the west, it is spectacular. I am a geography graduate, and, having studied coastal features such as Durdle Door and the longshore drift of Chesil, I am immensely proud that they are now in my constituency.

Beyond the coast, there is equally special countryside: the nature reserves at Arne, Lodmoor and Radipole, the heathland of the isle of Purbeck, the rugged beauty of Portland. All that is just a convenient train ride from Members' constituencies, and I am sure that the Travel Office would be pleased to make arrangements. Indeed, I look forward to seeing the many who will, I am sure, come down for the Tolpuddle rally, which, although it takes place in West Dorset, will take place within a mile of what is now a Labour seat. Yes, one of the crucibles of trade unionism is finally within spitting distance of a Labour constituency.

Some may wish to visit our other tourist attractions. I am thinking particularly of Conservative Members, who may want to take a break from their current campaigning. At Bovington they can visit the tank museum, and view such classics as the Chieftain, the Patton and the Challenger—and if that seems a little too limiting, they could of course pop across the road to visit Monkey World.

Beyond those attractions are great natural resources—for example, the Purbeck stone and Portland stone that can be seen in buildings all over London. We have important oil reserves. We have an international centre for

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nuclear decommissioning technology at Winfrith, and we have the army camps at Bovington and Lulworth. I was delighted to receive a letter yesterday from Colonel Beer at Bovington, reassuring me that plans to move an armoured reconnaissance regiment into the Stanley barracks were proceeding. There is a delay because of the commitment to provide our armed forces with decent accommodation, but contrary to local rumour put about during the election, the growth of Bovington is set to go ahead, with the welcome boost to our economy that will accompany it.

Further west, in Weymouth and Portland, we have a strong light industrial base, particularly involving defence-related employment, and, of course, the tourism economy, which is vital throughout my constituency.

In many ways we appear to have everything that we need in South Dorset, but we also need our fair slice of the cake. Our education standard spending assessment is one of the worst in the country, our councils desperately need a fairer funding formula, and we need to go on trying to gain attention for those of our industries that are struggling. I am thinking particularly of agriculture, tourism and defence, the mainstays of the economy of the south-west of England and of South Dorset.

Clearly agriculture is suffering, even in Dorset, where we have been fortunate enough not to have any cases of foot and mouth. The low value of the euro is one of the many difficulties that farmers face, as it translates into lower export prices and lower payments from Brussels. I look forward to campaigning for entry into the single European currency in the interests of farmers—just as soon as my right hon. Friends tell me that it is in our national interest to do so.

Tourism has, of course, also been badly hit by foot and mouth. I have tried my best to sell the area to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the rest of the House, as the perfect place to visit—it is natural rambling country—but there is now real hardship among our small tourism businesses, and footpaths have only recently reopened. Those businesses need all the help that they can get.

The seaside resorts also have long-term needs. I hope that Ministers will continue to press in Brussels for their eligibility for European Union regeneration funding. Swanage and Weymouth offer great family holidays by the sea, but are struggling to compete with Spain, Portugal and other countries in the eurozone where our pounds go a lot further than they do on the South Dorset coast.

It is crucial for the South Dorset economy that we retain strong international links, the presence of the armed forces and a vibrant defence industry. Last Sunday I attended the veterans festival in Weymouth, along with many hundreds of ex-service men and women. The area is very proud of its veterans and, uniquely, even has monthly reunions. It is a community that is proud to be British, and proud to look beyond our borders for its friendships.

Defence policy has always been, and will remain, important to the constituency. It is a remarkable tribute to the local people, on Portland in particular, that the area has not suffered more following the closure of the Ministry of Defence establishments in the last decade. It is also a tribute to schemes such as the new deal, the regional development agency and the European social fund that unemployment is now half what it was four years ago, despite thousands of job losses on Portland.

I was delighted to hear in the Gracious Speech that we maintain our commitment to NATO and that we will be asked to agree to ratify the Nice treaty. Britain has a unique place in the world. As has been pointed out, our membership of the European Union, NATO, the Security Council, the G8 and the Commonwealth give us a unique insight into and understanding of international affairs. As active and respected players in all those organisations we can punch above our weight in many ways. We must use that influence to work to persuade the people of Europe of the merits of enlarging the European Union. Enlargement must be allowed to proceed.

Many of the countries aspiring to join have fragile democracies that survived the threat from extremist politicians thanks to the promise of entry to the EU and access to that market. Enlargement does not come without a cost, but it offers bigger markets, more stability in our region and the further extension of human rights and democracy. Enlargement offers peace and security to us and to our neighbours. Enlargement is good for Britain, and the Nice treaty is good for Britain. I look forward to furthering those arguments in the House. What is good for Britain internationally is good for my constituents, and they are the people whom I shall always seek to serve first and foremost in the House.

12.26 pm

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire): It is with great pleasure and delight that I rise to speak as the newly elected hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire. It is an especial pleasure to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight). His adherence to the traditions of the House, including the small circle of people—the doughnut effect—that he attracted as he spoke, shows that he has learned his early lessons well. He speaks of his new constituency with great relish, enthusiasm and considerable humour.

The hon. Gentleman's kind remarks about his predecessor, Ian Bruce, are much appreciated by Conservative Members. Ian was a friend and colleague. For a time, he was my Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Department of Social Security. Conservative Members will miss him. The way in which the hon. Gentleman addressed the task of his maiden speech and spoke so fluently and well, bodes well for his career here. We wish him well and look forward to his contributions to future debates.

I will not stretch the credulity of the House with descriptions of an epic boyhood in Bedfordshire, and how I dipped my toes in the River Ivel and listened to the distant halloo of the Oakley hunt. It will not have escaped hon. Members' attention that my childhood home was Bury in Lancashire, which I was proud to represent here for some 14 years. It is with grateful thanks to the good people of North-East Bedfordshire that I am returned as one of the unfortunately named "retreads".

I am proud to be a retread. For those who have served in public life, there is an advantage in taking that experience into a different form of work and experiencing something outside the House for a time. One sees things from a new perspective, finds out from other people what is really on their minds and what they would really like us to talk about, gains a new insight into how they see us, and learns what the price of coffee is in the rest of London, rather than here.

I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House and members of staff for the warm welcome that they have given me since I returned. I mention in particular members of the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship and members of the parliamentary football team, who have been very kind to me. I must scotch the rumour that I decided to return to the House on the day I learned that the parliamentary football team now went abroad to play matches against teams such as the Hungarian Parliament. It is not true that that settled my mind, but it did make a contribution.

North-East Bedfordshire is, geographically, a vast constituency. It stretches from Northamptonshire in the north to Hertfordshire in the south, from Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes to Cambridgeshire and Huntingdon. The historic county town of John Bunyan is neatly skirted around. In all aspects, North-East Bedfordshire is a delight. Domesday book villages nurture listed churches throughout the constituency. The rivers Ivel and Great Ouse flow through the constituency, and the channels of communication are the historic Great North road and the Great North Eastern Railway, which takes commerce right through the constituency to various destinations.

Predominantly rural, the villages of north Bedfordshire and the activities of farming and growing have for generations given a particular shape and character to the people and the land there. There is deep affection for and understanding of the county's heritage. However, we also look to the future of agriculture, which remains one of the nation's great, and most efficient and productive, industries. Agriculture makes a tremendous contribution to national life.

History and attractions abound in the constituency. In Cardington we have the sheds where the great airships such as the R101 were built. The Shuttleworth aircraft collection and the Swiss garden are world renowned. In the north of the constituency, the Santa Pod raceway would provide an enjoyable day out for most hon. Members. At the southern tip of the constituency, Arlesey Town football club brought home the FA vase from Wembley as recently as 1995. In this place, the constituency is also represented, in the Refreshment Department, by the excellent products of the Jordan family, who manufacture healthy food and cereal bars that we all enjoy.

The towns of Biggleswade and Sandy are growing rapidly. People in those towns are employed in modern engineering industries and in high-tech, commercial and retail businesses. However, a growing number of them commute to various other places, particularly London.

Business, local authorities and the voluntary sector come together to promote pride in Bedfordshire. People there are friendly and hard working and very proud of their public services. They are also strongly community minded, as was demonstrated to me on my first constituency engagement, last weekend, at the re-opening of the Great Barford lower school swimming pool, an event which I much enjoyed.

My constituents deserve the very best from those who represent them, and in Sir Nicholas Lyell they had exactly that—a man dedicated to public life, serving constituency, his county, his party and the nation. He will be remembered in the House for his 22 years' service, which were distinguished by his courteous manner and his able holding of some of the major legal offices of state. In

Bedfordshire, in both the constituencies that he represented, he is remembered on many doorsteps as a Member of Parliament who worked for everyone. He will be much missed in the county, and as someone whom I must follow, he sets me a great challenge.

Sir Nicholas was my predecessor. However, I should also like to spend a moment on my successor, the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), who beat me in the 1997 general election and has retained his seat. On more occasions than were really necessary he has made generous references to me, both in this place and in the constituency. For that I am truly grateful. It has also served the purpose that he sought and ensured that I did not chase him again. I hope that he appreciates that.

I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Bury, North has yet encountered my favourite old constituent, whose cheek and brass neck will take some matching by my new constituents. He came to see me at one surgery, from one of our poorest council estates, sat down and said, "Mr. Burt, I want your help. My front door was wrecked six weeks ago. I told the council, but they have done nothing about it." As a Conservative Member with a Labour-controlled local authority, I eagerly picked up my pen, as the case was money for jam, I said, "Mr. So-and-so, that is interesting. Tell me about it. How did your front door come to be wrecked?" He said, "The police broke it down during a raid." I put down my pen. The case was clearly more difficult than it seemed. I said, "What does that have to do with the council?" He said, "The police told the council all about it and the council could have told me. If I had been there, I would have held open the door for the police and they wouldn't have had to break it down." I looked at him very sternly and said, "You must tell me, did the police find anything in their raid?" Having checked that there was no one else in the room, looking round very carefully, he whispered to me, "Mr. Burt, not what they were looking for."

Having demonstrated their scepticism about the Government by returning me at the general election, my constituents will have listened to the Gracious Speech with mixed emotions. They all welcome the measures that are obviously intrinsically good, such as the reform of the adoption laws. For those who commute on the trains, the reform of rail safety will be a matter of great importance. However, they all share my wry bemusement about how competition and enterprise can be strengthened, as the Gracious Speech states, by the Government's usual activities of higher taxation and greater regulation.

Bedfordshire's rapidly growing population will be intensely interested in proposals for reforms designed to deliver better public services. Like me, they may feel that past performance does not bode well. We now have fewer police officers, our health authority is underfunded and our Conservative county council—triumphantly re-elected the other week—struggles to provide services for those who are already there, let alone the many thousands of people who will live in the new houses that the Government have asked to be built in the county.

My constituents will expect me to scrutinise carefully the progress that the Government seek to make as set out in the Gracious Speech, and I shall certainly do so. There was deep disappointment, though little surprise, at the lack of a mention of rural affairs. The impact of the crisis in the countryside is very deep and goes beyond the immediate families and into the communities. The loss of

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about 60 per cent. of farm income during the previous Parliament is an indication of that, and the anger that the farming community felt was expressed at the ballot box.

I am aware of the conventions of the House and do not wish to delve too deeply or be too critical, but Labour Members will know that I will return time and again to this subject. It adds to the bitterness in the countryside that the Government have given such priority to the reintroduction of a Bill to ban hunting. Opinions on the subject are mixed, but its relative importance, given the issues of income and livelihood, is really not very high.

For those who represent rural areas, the future of Europe and of the common agricultural policy is crucial. I am sure that next week Ministers will address the issues of CAP reform and the Government's aims and intentions on the matter will be closely scrutinised. The handling of agrimonetary compensation—the mechanism for resolving the difference in value between the pound and the euro—has not been a happy story and does not bode well. I will seek a commitment that all the support that is available through that mechanism will be applied for. The mid-term review of the CAP will coincide with further discussions on enlargement. We want to ensure that government is relatively joined up in that regard, and that before any treaties are signed, the interests of the agricultural community are well protected.

Both the European Union and this country stand at yet another crossroads. The new Foreign Secretary—an old friend whom I wish well in his new responsibilities—talked about some future issues in a general way, but as the House knows, it is not the general intentions on Europe but the specifics that cause the problem. My party put the issue of Europe right at the heart of its election campaign. It was brave to do so, when every public opinion poll over the preceding four years showed that the public saw it as a less important priority than we did. I believe that we were right to attempt to move public opinion towards awareness of the pressing issues concerning the European Union and our relationship with it, but our tone and our approach have been seriously at fault.

I referred earlier to those with whom I have been working outside the House. Many are Conservative voters but others, who ought to have been Conservative voters—predominantly, ominously, the young—seem to move in circles in which it has become an automatic reflex not to vote Conservative. Our clients were significant UK and international companies, involved with Europe and far from blind to its institutional problems, but I am afraid that too many expressed unease with our approach to the issues. All too often, the potency of our arguments was lost by an almost comic hostility towards Brussels. If we are to play our true role in these debates and to hold the Government to account on issues such as democracy and sovereignty, as our constituents rightly expect us to, we will have to take a much more constructive and realistic approach.

I strongly support what Europe has achieved for its peoples over 50 years of reconstruction, but I am profoundly disturbed at the pace of a process of political integration that seems to have a dubious democratic mandate, and at the continual fudging of the central issue of demarcation regarding what Europe should do together

and what individual nations must do individually in order to protect their national integrity and safeguard the significance of their own internal election processes.

I do not believe that a single currency is a panacea for those ills. The debate about it during this Parliament must be informed by a Conservative party that argues its case cogently and reasonably, rather than obsessively, as the public perceived it. Not least among the reasons why I hold that view is that I am not convinced that the Government truly understand that the best way of being positive Europeans is to ask the uncomfortable and difficult questions, rather than to swim with a tide that seems exhilarating at first, but which is fundamentally dangerous as time goes on.

I have two brief final points. First, from my observation of friends outside the House, I agree wholeheartedly with the speeches made during the Queen's Speech debate that have warned us quickly to consider further reform in this place as a means of re-engaging the public in the political process. A Parliament that is over-dominated by the Executive in theory is now over-dominated by it in practice.

Political parties will have to relax their grip on Back Benchers, who must be prepared to see an honourable career in the House away from the Front Benches. As a House, we can no longer assume that what interests us for hours will interest people outside. People increasingly want their politicians to meet them on their own ground, and to have more unwhipped, thoughtful and honest debates on many issues that are considered to be either Cinderellas or too hot to handle. The media must play their part. They cannot wish for more independent Back Benchers on both sides of the House and then pursue them all with the idea of split and division. In a modern Parliament, the media ensure that the people get the politicians that they want them to have.

Secondly, I would go further than the recent Hansard Society report on the future of Parliament and argue that Select Committees should have the power to initiate, introduce and take forward Bills, rather than merely to make recommendations at the conclusion of an inquiry. That would address the problem that virtually everything that occurs on the Floor of the House is confrontational. Hon. Members are almost obliged to be either for or against a proposition merely because of its origin, when they have usually played no part in either the consultation or the drafting process. If we are to end yah-boo politics, or at least to provide some time when we can take our own decisions on whether to legislate, more independence in proposing legislation might just help us.

People expect a lot of this Parliament, in which I am extremely proud and delighted to be able to take part once again. I assure the House and the people of North-East Bedfordshire that I shall do my very best to represent them, and to encourage the House to meet the expectations of people outside in what I expect to be a challenging and fascinating Parliament.

12.43 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): It is a pleasure to welcome the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) back to the House. It seems like only yesterday that he occupied the exalted position of opposition leader on the planning committee of the London borough of Haringey when I was its chairman. I shall never look at a Jordan's crunch in the same way, having heard his comments.

I compliment the hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight) on his speech and his amazing victory in the general election. It is a shame that the village of Tolpuddle is not quite situated in his constituency—it will be another four years before that triumph is achieved.

I shall be brief, as I know that many other hon. Members wish to speak. We should always recognise that we are elected to this place because thousands of people in our constituencies have put enormous faith in us to carry out a representative job on their behalf. I pay tribute and give my thanks to the people of Islington, North for electing me again to Parliament, for the support that they have given me and for their hopes about the second term of a Labour Government. They want us to ensure that the problems of inner-city deprivation, housing shortages and serious childhood poverty will continue to be addressed. In particular, the re-elected Government must recognise and understand that, unless the problems of affordable rented housing in the inner city—especially council housing—are not addressed, the electorate will not be so patient with us. They will be very angry indeed. Far too many children are being brought up in incredibly overcrowded and poor-quality conditions. Those problems must be addressed.

This Parliament will also be dominated by the quality of public services and the delivery of those services. I am a member of Unison, a large public sector trade union, and I was at its conference recently. A great sense of anger was obvious in many of those union members, who have loyally supported the Labour party for many years, about the proposed privatisation of services in the NHS and local government. We should pause and think more carefully about the value and the quality of public employment and services, and their ability to deliver a democratic and accountable service to the people.

During the election campaign, we had a big public meeting in my borough about the future of Post Office jobs. Those jobs are under threat in many parts of this country because of international pressure and the ludicrous competition rules that insist that each national post office can compete with all the others on their own turf. The idea is that that is more efficient, but I beg to differ with that view. I question the idea that Europe is improved by endless competition between public services or by their privatisation.

The rules of competition seem to encourage the break-up of public service, not to encourage it, which is part of a worldwide phenomenon in which people feel that their elected politicians, Governments and parliaments are powerless to do anything. Several people who did not vote in the election—and the turnout was lamentably low everywhere, including in my constituency, where just under half the electorate voted—asked me what elected politicians could do when multinational corporations are so powerful.

I look to the Government, in all their dealings with the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and all the other international trade organisations and bodies, to remember that the world economy should not be seen as beyond the power of elected Governments. There are some incredibly powerful multinational corporations that hide out in tax havens, the better to plot the transfer of capital around the world, and it is time for elected Governments to assert themselves over those companies and their power. Too often and for too long, individual regions and countries have operated

a beggar thy neighbour policy of offering ever greater tax concessions and tax holidays to multinational companies to go to that area and do whatever they do for a few years before they move on to the next tax haven. It is time to engender a sense of responsibility into trade and industrial planning around the world. We look to a Labour Government to pursue a policy of fairer and more just trade, and more control over the flow of capital around the world.

The flip side of that issue is that the conditions under which many people work are poor and, in some cases, getting worse. The level of exploitation increases down the chain of production of sports goods, or any other type of clothing, so that the poorest people, in the poorest countries, are paid a pittance—sometimes child labour is used—to produce goods sold as luxury and fashion items in western European stores. It is important that our aim should be not to weaken the International Labour Organisation and its conventions but to strengthen them, so that child labour becomes a thing of the past and every child can expect to go free to school to be educated, instead of being sent to work in a brick or clothing factory. The absolute right to belong to an independent trade union, which can improve conditions for workers, must also be recognised.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, in his opening remarks, talked about the importance of United Nations institutions. I draw the House's attention to some sanguine comments by Kofi Annan on the radio the other morning. He said that the United Nations was underfunded, got all the problems when no one else could sort them out and received all the criticism when it was incapable of sorting them out.

We need the United Nations; it is the only thing that can give us any hope of a sane and peaceful world. We must therefore ensure that every member of the United Nations makes its full financial contributions to it. I hope that the new Foreign Secretary will put whatever pressure he can on the United States to pay up in full both the backlog of its contributions and its current contributions to the United Nations, and that we contribute as much as we possibly can to the other United Nations agencies and institutions, especially the human rights and refugee commissions. Both do extremely important work. Both recognise the denial of human rights, often as a result of economic exploitation, and recognise the plight of refugees around the world.

While we luxuriate in what I believe to be a largely false distinction between economic and political migrants, we should look at why people seek asylum in the first place. In my constituency, I meet people who have been bombed out of their homes in Somalia and whose families have disappeared, and people from many other places around the world. They were insulted as much as I and many others were insulted by the rhetoric that the Leader of the Opposition used in the election campaign. We should have a greater sense of humanity about the victims of the world economic system and the language used against them.

I intervened in the speech of the Foreign Secretary to raise the issue of peace in this world. There are a large number of wars still going on. Many people are dying in those conflicts, which are often economically based. They are wars fought almost as a surrogate battle for a conflict

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about mineral resources. We must do all that we can to support peacekeeping efforts and ensure that those conflicts are brought to a conclusion.

We still have a vast arsenal of nuclear weapons in this country. President Bush, who can call himself democratically elected only by virtue of the assistance of his brother in Florida, tells us that he has a mandate to introduce national missile defence, which is an untested technology—or one that has been tested only in so far as it has been proven not to work. He is prepared to spend vast amounts of American taxpayers' money on NMD. It is essential for him that the United Kingdom supports NMD and takes part in it by making available Fylingdales and Menwith Hill as listening stations.

I am not alone in the House in opposing NMD. Many Labour Members and some Liberal Democrat Members have said that they are strongly opposed to it and concerned about the future. I hope that, instead of undertaking the consultation exercise with President Bush, we will oppose NMD from the beginning and all that goes with it. It would lead to a new arms race with Russia and China and would bring about not peace but the opposite in the long term.

We shall face many foreign policy and human rights issues in the next few years. I hope that ratification of the International Criminal Court will show that the dictators of the world will have no hiding place in the future. Unfortunately, former President Pinochet was allowed to go back to Chile, where we hope that he is to be put on trial. I ask the Foreign Secretary to recognise that the United Kingdom holds many documents in secret under the 30-year rule or the longer rules that may be of assistance in prosecuting Pinochet for his role in the disappearance of many people in Chile. I ask him to consider releasing those documents so that they can be used against General Pinochet and his henchmen.

We face problems in many places in the world. I draw attention to the danger of an imminent war in Morocco over the future of the western Sahara. The United Nations must go ahead with an independent free referendum so that the people of the western Sahara can decide their future and prevent the whole thing from descending into a war.

People in my constituency live the problems daily. For too long, the island of Cyprus has been divided. I hope that in the second term of a Labour Government we can bring about talks that will lead to the peaceful reunification of Cyprus and the recognition of all traditions in that island.

We have a great role to play in this, but—here I echo the point made by the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire at the beginning of the debate—Parliament must be a place where independent, free-thinking voices are readily listened to and heard. It also has to be a place that brings its Government and Executive to account for what they do. That is what makes for better and stronger Parliaments, better and stronger democracy and, ultimately, better government and better legislation as a result. That is the reason that we are elected to Parliament in the first place and I am looking forward to the next four or five years in that vein.

12.55 pm

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield): I am very pleased to be able to speak in the debate on the Queen's Speech and pleased but somewhat nervous to be making my maiden speech. I am nervous, first, because I have spent my whole adult life so far as a historian studying and teaching the history of this country, the development of our democracy and the workings of the Chamber: actually to sit on the green Benches and contribute to the debate is more than a little awe-inspiring. I thank the voters of Chesterfield who have placed their trust in me by returning me as the first Liberal Democrat MP for Chesterfield and the first Liberal MP since 1929.

Secondly, I am nervous because I am more than conscious that I follow in the footsteps of one of the leading political figures of the past half-century. Tony Benn, the previous Member for my constituency, was highly regarded in Chesterfield as a good constituency MP who helped a great many local people with a huge variety of problems. He was always willing to take up any cause and never reluctant to tackle his own local Labour councillors when he thought that they were wrong. He extends that approach, of course, to his party nationally and to the present Labour Government. He is a passionate and eloquent advocate of his beliefs to which he always remained faithful, however controversial they were.

I was privileged to hear Tony Benn speak many times in Chesterfield and on occasion, over the years, to put questions to him and debate with him. I disagreed with him on much of what he said but no one could ever doubt the sincerity and passion with which he holds his views. I hope that we shall hear much more from him in years to come, and that he has indeed, as he said, stood down to spend more time on his politics. His place in the political history books is assured, beginning with his first entry when he rewrote constitutional law by establishing the right of peers to renounce their title to stand for election to this Chamber.

My constituency was described during the election by Matthew Parris of *The Times* as a hard-bitten town. I can forgive Matthew much as he was the only national print media journalist to spot and predict openly that we were on course to win Chesterfield, but as an honorary Chesterfieldian—I have lived there for 22 years although not for my whole life—I must defend it against that description.

Chesterfield was an engineering and mining town as well as a market town. Stevenson, the great railway engineer, made it his home in the 19th century and is buried in the church around the corner from where I live. The mines have all gone now, although I had the privilege of going down Markham pit as the guest of Chesterfield miners about two years before the pit was finally closed. Much of the heavy engineering has regrettably gone too, including Markham Engineering, which built the channel tunnel boring equipment. More recent blows have fallen in the past few months on old industries such as Donkins and Dema Glass. However, although the town suffers higher than average unemployment, it is beginning to recover from those blows. New industries, especially light engineering and high-tech computer firms, are locating and expanding in the area.

Chesterfield also has a great deal to offer as a market town, with the largest open air market in the country in continuous use since the middle ages. A new shopping

centre opened last year. The world famous crooked spire is still there. It did not straighten up in shock at the election result as Matthew Parris predicted it might.

Chesterfield has its own place in history with the Revolution House museum. In 1688, it was a small isolated country inn where the Duke of Devonshire and others met in secret to plot the revolution of that year—a revolution that although it contributed to some religious bigotry was none the less a landmark in the development of democracy in this country.

Chesterfield is an excellent tourist base as a gateway to the splendours of the Peak district and to the wonders of Chatsworth house, Hardwick hall and Haddon hall. Wherever one stands in Chesterfield, one can look up and see fields and moorland surrounding the town, giving it a pleasant and open aspect.

We also have an excellent football team, which has done remarkably well in recent years despite problems with its management, its finances and the previous Minister for Sport. Its success in recent years has done much to boost the town's morale and community spirit.

I should like to reassure the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) that all Liberal Democrat Members oppose the national missile defence system. It is based on technology that does not work and that will be immensely expensive to develop to a point where it still could not work 100 per cent. The very process of developing that technology will destabilise the 1972 anti-ballistic missile treaty and the many advances that have been made in the past 10 years in the cause of nuclear reduction and world peace.

I almost prefer the system of nuclear-free zones, in which I used to live—first, in Sheffield in the 1970s, and then in Derbyshire in the 1980s. We could always rest secure in our beds in the knowledge that we would somehow be exempt in the event of nuclear war because our road signs told us that we lived in a nuclear-free zone. Perhaps I should write to President Bush with my suggestion; he might take up the idea. Like NMD, it would not work in the slightest, but it is far cheaper and does not destabilise world peace.

I hope that the House will indulge me slightly if I return to yesterday's lead debate, in which I had hoped to make my maiden speech. For the past 22 years, I have been a secondary school teacher. For 12 of those years, I was the head of a sixth form. I also have three children of school age, who are currently at school in Chesterfield. I have some knowledge of our state education system from both sides of the fence—as a teacher and as a parent, or in the horrible words that Governments prefer to use about our public services these days, as a producer and as a consumer.

Two of those who opened Wednesday's debate emphasised that they had not attended public school. I would add my own disclaimer to their comments, and I think that that matters because more than 92 per cent. of our children are educated in the state system, not in the public school sector. As the former Member for Islwyn, Neil Kinnock, said so passionately, they owe their life chances to the state system. I was the first member of my family, living on a large council estate in Sheffield, ever to go to university, and it transformed my life. I very much doubt whether I should have been able to take that opportunity, back in 1975, if my then unemployed father and I had been faced with the prospect of yearly tuition fees and a £10,000 to £14,000 debt on graduation.

I have spent the last two thirds of my teaching career working in what have been controversially described as bog standard comprehensive schools. Hon. Members can imagine how my teaching colleagues and I felt about that description of our life's work. However, as I am supposed not to be controversial in my maiden speech, I shall leave the details to hon. Members' imaginations on this occasion.

There is an often-professed vision behind the Labour Government's approach to education, education, education—a vision that I can share and applaud, even if I have doubts about the reality of its implementation. I suggest that all Governments would do well to spend a little more time consulting the work force before launching into schemes that sounded good when their advisers drew them up, but which revealed their flaws when imposed too quickly and without consulting those who have to deliver them. The recent problems with the introduction of AS-levels are a classic example.

Long suggested and generally welcomed by teachers as a valuable way to widen our over-narrow and prescriptive academic curriculum, AS-levels were introduced far too quickly and without enough practical planning. Last summer, I had to scrap a successful and innovative A-level course, and then at very short notice and with no extra money to buy brand new textbooks, which had not even been written for a brand new course, a colleague and I had to prepare and teach the new AS-level. It was February of this year before I attended an exam board course that gave me the final information on how the course would be taught and examined, yet we were already 70 per cent. of the way through teaching it and the course work exams were imminent.

If we as teachers had problems, hon. Members can imagine how the students felt. They have been the guinea pig generation for the national curriculum, for SATs and now for AS-levels, none of which was planned, introduced or funded properly. Of course, hon. Members do not have to take my word alone on that. Nick Tate, the then head of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority said recently that the AS-level scheme, which he helped to devise, seemed like a good idea at the time. Having just completed his first year as head of a school, he now says that he can see the problems and the miscalculations, which could have been avoided. That lesson should have been learned after the rushed introduction of the national curriculum, which has had several major rewrites since the late 1980s.

Like managers in industry, Governments of all parties would do better if they carried their work force with them after consultation rather than regarding staff as an enemy within who inflict scars upon one's back.

In principle, I welcome the secondary schools review. We should never be complacent; we can always improve. However, I hope that the Government will work through and with teachers and public sector workers rather than imposing measures on them, regardless of their professional judgment.

1.5 pm

Ms Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): I am delighted to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes). I understand his nervousness, but he should not worry about it because we are all nervous when we make maiden speeches, and some of us

[*Ms Bridget Prentice*]

are nervous about every speech that we make. I welcome the fact that he is another history teacher; that was my profession when I had a real job. I assure him that his skills are much needed here to remind some hon. Members about the history of our country. He follows a great parliamentarian, Tony Benn, but I suspect that he will be more supportive of the Government than his predecessor. I welcome that.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight) also made his maiden speech, which was excellent. As a history teacher, I have taken pupils to that part of the country, for example, to visit Tolpuddle. I am sure that his contributions to our proceedings will be warmly welcomed in future.

I appreciated the comments of the hon. Member for Chesterfield on national missile defence. A system that cannot be fully operational, even if it is a good idea, should go back to the drawing board. I hope that, when he has the opportunity, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence will express that view to President Bush.

I shall speak briefly about international affairs, but I want to concentrate on local issues. I hope that hon. Members will indulge me, given that the debate on the Queen's Speech covers all the subjects in it. I welcome the measures to improve the delivery of public services. The emphasis on health, education and crime underlines the Labour party's commitment to improving quality of life for all.

The Queen's Speech is historic because it heralds the legislation for a full second term of a Labour Government. Like many of my colleagues, I welcome that. I especially welcome the prospect of a measure to tackle crime and the proceeds from it. I hope that the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill will be reintroduced for some offences. I listened with interest to the comments of the leader of the Liberal Democrats in the opening debate, when he talked about the rights of individuals and civil liberties.

I shall not repeat my comments made in previous debates on mode of trial about the myth of trial by jury being a God-given right, which has existed in this country from time immemorial. While we treasure the rights and freedoms that a democratic society enjoys, we can hold them sacred only if they are accompanied by responsibility. As legislators, we have a responsibility to the victims of crime. Ensuring that perpetrators are tried fairly and given sentences that reflect their crimes will deter others and, most important, give victims faith in the justice system. In the past, they have often felt that it did not reflect their needs.

I want to mention two specific aspects that I hope will be developed through the laws that will be passed in this Session and beyond. I shall comment first on international issues. I can tell my right hon. Friends on the Front Bench that I was delighted to hear the Foreign Secretary say this morning that we were European. I think that that is the first time I have heard a Foreign Secretary—or, indeed, any Member of this House—say specifically that we in this country were Europeans. We are not on the edge of Europe. We are not people who occasionally have little forays into Europe, as though it were some other place beyond our understanding. Our place is in the heart of Europe.

I hope that we shall make strong and clear representations, in the House and outside it, about our role in Europe and that we shall engage the people of this country so that they, too, will believe that we are at the heart of Europe. I also hope that when we debate the single currency, we shall do so in a positive and strong fashion. I look forward to that debate.

Of course, we rightly feel that we have a strong, close relationship with the United States, but let us not overstate that relationship. The ignorance of our parliamentary system shown by commentators in the United States often appals me. It could be that people in America spend a great deal of time discussing internal matters and rarely engage with news from Britain or the rest of Europe. A commentator in the *Washington Post* said of this general election:

"Nothing notable there. Almost every Government since 1945 has been re-elected."

That shows lamentable ignorance of our democratic process. Almost every Government? Well, yes, so long as they were not Labour ones. I am delighted that, on this occasion, we have managed to re-elect a Labour Government for a second term.

Another commentator reflecting on our re-election two weeks ago—unsurprisingly, one who was a speech writer for the first President Bush—said that we, the Labour Government, were rejecting the leadership of the United States. I cannot think of anything more patronising. No one could say that anyone other than the Labour Prime Minister of this country led when we were dealing with the conflict in south-east Europe. No one could say that anyone other than the Labour Deputy Prime Minister helped to ensure that the negotiations on climate change at Kyoto took place. Furthermore, it is the Labour Secretary of State for International Development who has led the world in trying to increase funding to eradicate world poverty.

When President Bush talks about high levels of receptivity among the leaders of Europe—I must learn this common language that we are supposed to share with our American colleagues—perhaps he might reflect that he could take a lead from some of the actions that we have taken in the past. I hope that my Government will continue their strong support for the European Union, and that they will continue to lead in the European Union and in our efforts to eradicate world poverty and to develop measures on climate change and the environment.

More parochially, I want to talk about getting people in my constituency and elsewhere off benefit and into work. I know, with some sadness, that my constituency has had the slowest fall in youth unemployment in the country. Someone has to come at the end of the list, but I am particularly concerned about that because we also have one of the highest levels of youth unemployment in the country. We need to do more to ensure that the young people in my constituency and elsewhere are given the jobs that they need and deserve.

My colleagues from outside London often think that life in London is very cushy and that we have a fairly high quality of life. I have to tell them that I represent a constituency whose level of unemployment is still much higher than in the country at large. That is despite the excellent work done under the new deal in the previous Parliament. One of the main reasons for that is that the deprivation and poor skills levels in my constituency are holding people back.

That is why I believe that we must put more effort into our regeneration initiatives to ensure that those skills levels are increased. We need to go further, not just, and not necessarily, even, in increasing the budgets for those initiatives, welcome though that would be, but in ensuring that the money that we spend is earmarked and well used. That skills deficit remains, and while the ideas are fine, their execution will be the guide as to whether we succeed.

I hope that the execution of those ideas will not be stymied by inaction caused by lack of skills and that the Government make it a priority that partnerships in regeneration deliver, even if that means taking tough decisions and putting aside old prejudices as well as investing and improving the skills of local people.

In Lewisham, we have received handsome sums to help with regeneration, both in the deprived Downham area in my constituency and for the single regeneration budget in Lewisham town centre. The coming of the docklands light railway to Lewisham has been a major factor in generating the potential for new jobs and the SRB for the town centre is both creative and ambitious, but it must be deliverable. That means that those involved must set aside personal aggrandisement and blinkered approaches. They must work together to ensure the success of that regeneration bid, because this is not the time for sitting in happy contemplation of what might be—it is a time for action and obvious delivery on the ground.

The Queen's Speech says that we are to legislate on land registry, so I shall hang on that hook the comments that I want to make about planning laws. It is time that the Government took up the issue and changed the planning laws radically. In my experience in Lewisham, East, planning law is often developed piecemeal, inconsistently and without thorough consultation with the local community. Where consultation does take place, often only lip service is paid to it and there is no engagement with what the local community wants.

In saying that, I am not for a moment advocating nimbysism, which is an abhorrent concept. Indeed, I often admire the fact that the French, for example, can be very creative in their developments and can put modern buildings alongside more historic ones, doing so boldly and courageously. I would have no problem at all with that happening in this country, and I wish that we were a great deal more courageous about the way we develop the land in which we live, so long as developments are not grotesque concrete jungles masquerading as homes, such as those that we built in the 1960s.

I am particularly concerned about speculative planning applications by developers with little or no interest in the local community. I give two examples. First, backfill and infill development is now a regular occurrence in London and we are in desperate need of more housing, but success can be achieved only if a development remains in keeping with the local community, so overdevelopment in a purely residential area will not work. It will not work because of the effects on transport, health and education in the local area, which will be detrimental not only to those who already live in the community, but to those who intend to come into it.

On the other hand, high-density development around a transport hub, with the consequential industrial and other-work uses, is an excellent idea that I hope the Government will encourage. That is why it is wrong to

consider backfill in residential areas, but right to encourage the enthusiastic development of high-density transport nodes.

Secondly, residents feel insecure when a developer can come back again and again with a planning application that has been rejected. There is a specific example in Blackheath in my constituency, where a freeholder has tried time after time to build on a six-storey building. Surely we should be able to find some way to prevent that year-on-year worry for residents. After all, we have a system for dealing with vexatious litigants in the courts. Could we not also devise ways of dealing with vexatious developers in our local communities?

One of the problems is that planning officers whose advice councillors rely on are far too timid in front of developers. So scared are they of a case being taken to appeal that they capitulate before the matter is even discussed. Thus developers get their way, whether immediately in the planning committee or under threat of an appeal. I return to the theme about rights having to be conjoined with responsibility. It is time that developers faced up to their responsibility to the local communities in which they wish to invest.

Equally worrying is the way in which the urban development programme can be ignored when it suits. What is the point of a lengthy process of consultation and decision making and of a draft development plan when its contents can be so easily ignored? I hope that the new Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions will look speedily at our planning laws, not to set them in some neolithic formula but to ensure that they allow for the dynamism of the 21st century and that the views of the local community are not just listened to but acted on.

I should also like us to have a statutory advocate on behalf of local residents where major planning applications are made. I urge local authority legal departments to be just a little more imaginative before advising members that they should agree an application, otherwise the developer will go to appeal. With clear structures in our planning laws, there would be no need for such conflict. Developers would know where they stood and local communities could help to enhance the developments in their patch in a way that was in keeping with the area. That is a form of devolution that the Government might like to consider, given how keen we are on devolution throughout the country.

I make a final plea. Those hon. Members who voted consistently for a ban on foxhunting are determined to see that ban in the course of this Parliament. I sat on the Standing Committee that considered the foxhunting Bill in the previous Session. There is no need for us to go through a lengthy and bureaucratic process to find another Bill. We already have one with its amendments, and I hope that it will be presented in this Session. I know that it will receive a speedy passage through the House. If necessary, let us use the Parliament Act to ensure that it becomes law. My constituents and those of most of my hon. Friends would welcome it.

I welcome much of what is in the Queen's Speech, but I want to see delivery on the ground. I want to see our commitment to diversity, dynamism and creativity in our communities. By giving more power to local communities, we can surely expect to see more successful outcomes for them.

1.23 pm

Patrick Mercer (Newark): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice) and I congratulate the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes) both on his speech and on his stunning victory in a beautiful town that I know well.

I wish to pay tribute to my two immediate predecessors and one other. Mrs. Fiona Jones was my immediate predecessor in Newark, and her achievements probably speak for themselves. I believe that she is now having more time to spend with her family. Her predecessor, Richard Alexander, was the Conservative Member for Newark. He was a firm friend of the constituency, the voters and the armed forces, on which I shall dwell in some detail in a moment.

I tread in the footsteps of Gladstone—at least, in his Tory footsteps. I remind the House of his prophetic words that his task was to pacify Ireland. We saw on television last night shots of the Ardoyne yet again up in flames. That in itself is not strange, but it was curious to see khaki uniforms on the streets again, rather than the bottle green of the Royal Ulster Constabulary—a sign that things are going very much amiss in the Province.

I have come to politics after 25 years as a regular soldier in the Nottinghamshire regiment, the Sherwood Foresters, followed by time as a defence correspondent with the BBC. What brought me into politics was the men with whom I served in the Foresters and their families, many of whom come from the Newark and Retford area, which I now have the privilege to represent. My father served in the same regiment. More than anything, it was recruiting these men, many from terribly underprivileged backgrounds, taking them into the Army, watching them being made into something special—those who survived—and then watching them go back out into a society that was often less than friendly to them.

Those men, along with many others, have tried to find jobs in my constituency in a failing agricultural community. I was stunned not to see any mention in the Gracious Speech of help for the agricultural community. Many of them tried to find jobs in the transport industry, which has spiralled downwards in decline in Newark and Retford. With our communications relying on the A1 and the routes to and from the coast, road haulage is terribly important to us, and it is in a terrible state of decline. The manufacturing industry has also been hammered particularly hard in the past four years.

I feel deeply about the situation, and I feel deeply about the people who have chosen me to represent them, and who—I say with due modesty—gave me a resounding success in Newark against someone who represented policies that have clearly failed in the area.

I shall now break with tradition and go back to the subject of defence. Newark and Retford have a distinguished military history. I shall skate over Robin Hood and go on to the three great sieges of Newark during the civil war. I named my son after Prince Rupert, one of the great heroes of the time. I particularly bring to bear the motto of Newark: “Deo Fretus Erumpe”—trust in God and sally forth. Newark’s arms are supported on one side by a fox and on the other by a foxhound, thank God.

In the first world war, Newark and Retford helped to contribute to 22 battalions of Sherwood Foresters, who are commemorated in the constituency of the hon.

Member for Chesterfield. There were 11,000 dead from Nottinghamshire who served in that regiment. Two regiments of Sherwood Rangers fought under another great Newark man, Allenby, out in Palestine. In the second world war, there were another seven battalions of Sherwood Foresters, and more important is the area’s contribution to our international effort as the home of the free Poles. Marshal Sikorski was buried in Newark, and there are still serried ranks of tombstones in London Road cemetery for the Polish dead of the second world war. There is a substantial Polish community at the heart of Newark, representing those ties over the past 50 or 60 years.

Newark and Retford men and women continue to serve in the forces today, providing soldiers for the Queen’s Royal Lancers, the Coldstream Guards, the Grenadier Guards, the Royal Green Jackets and the county regiment, the Sherwood Foresters, who are back on operations in Northern Ireland.

One of the great pleasures of canvassing hard in the constituency was that I came across some of my former soldiers. I knocked on a door in Tuxford the other day, and a gentleman answered, smiled broadly at me and said, “Therapist”. I immediately recognised him as the man who had been my colour sergeant about 10 years ago in Northern Ireland. A colour sergeant is a man who provides administrative support. He is not one of nature’s brightest of men, and we had been on an operation called “Therapist”. I had warned him of the operation and given him detailed orders, when he said, “Sir, I know absolutely nothing about this operation—but there is another operation planned for that day called Operation The Rapist.” Luckily, I did not have to write to a wife or a mother and tell them that their husband or son had been killed in “Operation The Rapist”. None the less, those memories still exist.

I should like to draw to the House’s attention the whole business of overstretch in the armed forces. There simply are not enough men and women to carry out the commitments that the Government have forced on the armed forces. Earlier, my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) mentioned that we had not enough combat pilots to pilot aircraft off the two proposed new aircraft carriers.

I emphasise, above and beyond all else, the need for manpower in the armed forces. It is no good having the kit, the intention and the policy if we have not the men to carry out the task. So often, the Army in particular will give the impression that everything is under control, be thoroughly positive and thoroughly straightforward, while not revealing the hurt that it is feeling.

As a defence correspondent in Kosovo, I saw a particular battle group that came to the theatre and was patently incapable of taking the field because it was so badly under-recruited. Two companies were made up by soldiers from other regiments, but both those other regiments were warned for operations in Northern Ireland. You cannot rob Peter to pay Paul incessantly; you cannot send a boy to do a man’s job. The armed forces must be allowed to recruit properly and effectively.

In many cases there are regiments that do the job well, and others that do not do it so well. The Army’s recruiting structure falls on something called the recruiting group. I suggest that the recruiting group has failed to meet its target of making up a 5,000 shortage in the Army. Yet

there are good examples of regiments that keep themselves fully manned: the Coldstream Guards, the Duke of Wellington's Regiment and the Sherwood Foresters. Why are those examples not followed across the armed forces, given that they demonstrate cost-effective, sensible, straightforward, practical methods of recruiting? I believe that only when our forces are up to strength and up to snuff can we ask them to perform the tasks that they are being asked to perform.

Let me return to my earlier point. Soldiers are on the streets of Northern Ireland again. They have not been there for some time. The police have been able to hold the ring in Ulster, but that is clearly no longer the case. We are asking men to do more than may be humanly possible. The commitments in Sierra Leone continue, and there is now a suggestion of a further commitment in the Balkans. We cannot do this without asking the armed forces to reach a point that they can simply no longer bear.

Tour gaps are meant to be 24 months; in other words, the gap between finishing a tour and starting another is meant to be two years. Nowhere in the Army is that target being reached—least of all in the specialist arms, where tour gaps in some instances are as short as 10 or even nine months.

There are those who will say that retention is the key to recruiting, but I suggest that it is the other way round. Unless men and women are recruited in number, there will not be enough men and women to do the dirty jobs that the armed forces are being asked to do. Disillusion will spread further than it has already, and more people will leak out of the bottom of the cycle faster than they are being added at the top. I ask the Secretary of State for Defence to examine the matter urgently, and not necessarily to entertain the placebos that are being offered.

I go a little further with regard to the Eurocorps. I do not believe in it, I do not consider it feasible, and I do not think that it is needed. If plans are to be made for it, however, let us get away from the typical cant that we hear. Non-straightforward answers are being given about plans, and there is no thought of adding combat power or fighting power to a corps. It is all very well providing headquarters, staff officers, communications, engineers and the like, but if a Eurocorps is to exist it must be properly recruited, not simply double-hatted, as in present practices.

I conclude by returning to the subject of my constituency. This may seem like a history lesson, but it was Newark men who helped to suppress the Irish rebellion of 1916. Some would say that that was the spark that lit the fire that burns on today. I do not know. I would not like to answer that, but in Balderton cemetery in Newark there are three gravestones of teenagers who were killed in Dublin in 1916 and whose bodies were brought home. In Ollerton, one can see the name of the last man of the Nottinghamshire regiment to be killed in Northern Ireland a few years ago. Let us hope that we see no more Nottinghamshire bones being brought back to be buried in this country because men have been killed in Ulster.

1.35 pm

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): I welcome hon. Members on both sides of the House who have made maiden speeches. The first whom I welcome is my hon. Friend the Member for Newark

(Patrick Mercer), who made an excellent speech and brings great experience to the House, having been a member of the armed forces and known what it is to serve. His comments about the number of dead from the regiment to which he referred are important because it reminds us of the debt of honour and gratitude that we owe to those who have served in past wars. We seek to ensure that we do not send our young men ever again to face such circumstances. He referred to the need to improve manpower. I shall return to that matter, but that is a powerful point.

I am not sure whether the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) was a maiden speech. I apologise because I was not in the House when he made the speech. I do not know whether one can be twice a maiden, but if that is the case, I wish him well. I understand that it was an excellent and powerful speech. He referred to reform in the House of Commons, with which I agree. We may want to examine some of his proposals on the writing of legislation and on Select Committees in greater detail when the moment comes. He is welcomed back by all Conservative Members and, I would like to think, many Labour Members, who got to know of his talents during his previous time in the House.

I welcome the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes), who made his maiden speech today. I welcome him partly because his predecessor was a man whom I greatly admired; I think that the whole House did. I did not always agree with him. Hon. Members on both sides of the House probably did not, but the power of his speeches in the House was something to behold. During the Maastricht treaty debates, while sitting on the Government Benches, I heard him make a 10-minute speech. After he had finished, I thought that I might as well pack it in because there was no way in which anyone could compete with both the power of his oratory and the way in which he covered the key subjects, made us laugh and made us cry. *[Interruption.]* He did not make a maiden today, so the Under-Secretary of State for Defence need not worry.

I hope that that is a tradition that the hon. Member for Chesterfield will follow, although his comments about ballistic missile defence seem to put him at odds with the previous leader of his party. The hon. Gentleman says that the Liberal Democrats oppose ballistic missile defence. I gather that Lord Ashdown favours it and has made a statement.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: Without raising the issue to the disadvantage of the House, I suggest that the hon. Gentleman reads not the headline in *The Guardian*, but the article itself. He will find that the headline and the article are totally inconsistent with each other.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I would like to take the right hon. and learned Gentleman's comments at face value. Only a lawyer could refer to the detailed small print, but it strikes me that there is a difference. I gather that the more people listened to the speech of the hon. Member for Chesterfield, the more they began to wonder whether that seat had moved from the Labour party to the Liberal Democrats. Perhaps it is a Labour seat, as his comments and perceptions suggest.

I also welcome the hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight). I understand that he made a good speech and has set the tone for the way in which he will proceed

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

in this Parliament. However, like him, I should like to pay tribute to his predecessor, who was a good friend of Conservative Members. I shall certainly miss Ian Bruce's ability to stand up and ask a question that no one expected, and to receive an answer that he perhaps did not want. It was a talent that he alone possessed and an effect that no one but he was able to produce. I shall miss him greatly. He was a great friend. Nevertheless, I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House.

The right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Ann Taylor) seemed to make almost a maiden speech. We have not heard from her for so long that we had started wondering whether she had given up the power of speech. As she knows, she and I have served together in Committee. Although I do not agree with everything that she says, I welcome her back to a speaking role.

I shall return later in my speech to some of the comments of the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell). However, he seemed to establish a set of conditions for how the rapid reaction force should proceed in its relations with NATO.

Mr. Campbell: I have said it before.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I know that, and in many senses I rather agreed with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. However, I think that we have to agree that none of the conditions has been met, and that the Government seem incapable of persuading their friends and allies to agree with them—if the Government themselves agree. We are therefore in serious danger of encountering some major problems in establishing the force. I shall return to the issue.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) made, as ever, an excellent speech. I make it a point to try to attend whenever he speaks in the Chamber. He made an important point about the importance of the transatlantic alliance. I believe that the Government underestimate the way in which that the Euro army—rapid reaction force or whatever one chooses to call it—has set in train a process that may well challenge possibly the most important alliance in the world. As he said, when the United Kingdom and the United States are united, the world is more likely to have peaceful outcomes than it is when we are divided. He made a very powerful point and I very much took it on board.

If I have missed out any speeches, I hope that hon. Members will forgive me. I should like to deal with other aspects of the Gracious Speech.

Although he is not in the Chamber, I should like first to welcome the Minister of State for Defence to his new position. He may like to note that two of his three immediate predecessors in that office headed off in the same direction to become Transport Ministers. It seems to be an almost established practice that Ministers for the Armed Forces who enjoy their job and have fun for a few years subsequently must serve the dog watch, trying to pull together the various possibilities in transport.

I wish the Minister's predecessor, now the Minister for Transport, well in his new brief. We had lots of fun with him in the House. I also hope that the Minister of State for Defence does not eventually find himself at the

Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions. However, I am sure that the Secretary of State for Defence will do something to reward rather than punish him.

I also pay tribute to members of the armed forces. Far too often, as was seen in the general election, they are almost forgotten, and few people seem to care about discussing their problems. The media are not all that interested in the subject. In the general election campaign, many members of the armed forces felt isolated and ignored. There was no serious opportunity in that campaign to debate the extremely important issue of defence. When I asked some members of the media why they seemed uninterested in anything that was being said about defence, they said that it was not really an issue. I like to think that the Secretary of State was pushing for a debate on the issue, but perhaps I am wrong; I do not know.

Nevertheless, we must certainly pay tribute to members of the armed forces for all that they do, and for the way in which they protect our peace and enable us to go about our daily lives without fear of tyranny or threat from anyone. They pursue British policy abroad without any concern for their own safety. Without them we would be a lot worse off.

The Gracious Speech gives us an opportunity to re-examine the Government's performance in defence and to reassess, now that the Government have been re-elected and Conservative Members are still in opposition, how we shall hold the Government to account. Whatever the outcomes of my party's internal discussions, our prime concern here is to hold the Government to account over the next four years and to tell them if they have failed to meet their commitments. I shall certainly do that and I am sure that my colleagues will, too.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Newark said, there are serious concerns about manpower and how the services have suffered. The strategic defence review, early in the previous Parliament, was meant to be foreign policy driven and to be about reshaping our defence priorities in response to the picture unfolding abroad, but it turned out to be mostly Treasury driven. The budget was cut by about £5 billion over four years, and the attempt to reshape our forces to an expeditionary capability was undermined by that heavy cut.

Our armed forces are still being asked to do more with what appears to be less. Retention has suffered badly, and although recruitment has stabilised to some extent, the fact remains that the Army, in particular, is undermanned, at about 8,000 men short of the SDR target. There appears to be little hope that the target will be met by 2005. Even the Defence Committee, which is of course Labour dominated, said that it would be realised at best by 2008. That is 10 years after the strategic defence review, and even that may turn out to be an optimistic assessment. That puts huge pressure on those who remain in the forces.

Just before the general election, we learned that all five of our major warships were out of action. As usual, the Ministry of Defence updated its definition of the word "operational", and said that aircraft carriers in port were not out of operation even though their flight decks were covered with tenting and they had scaffolding all over the place. Apparently, they were none the less operational.

A document, the fleet risk register, written by the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Nigel Essenhigh, highlighting the crisis in the Navy, was leaked to *The Daily Telegraph*. It said that the Navy could not play its role in NATO's joint rapid reaction force

"because ships are not always fully fit for the task."

It also said that "significant armoury shortfalls" have meant that ships are going to sea without enough ammunition to defend themselves and that they are at greater risk of being hit by air-to-sea missiles than at any other time.

When questioned about that on Radio 4, the Defence Secretary showed complacency of a high order even for a man who has a pretty high reputation for complacency in any case. He said that the document gave "an inaccurate picture" of the current state of the Royal Navy and that it was "out of date". I agree that it gave an inaccurate picture: the real state of affairs is even worse, because of the extra ships tied up in port and the failure to order the ships that are needed.

The Royal Air Force, too, has its share of problems—in particular, with the shortfall of fast jet pilots, there are likely to be difficulties in manning the new Typhoons that are due to come into service.

The Army is perhaps the worst hit of all. Just before the general election was called, we learned that internal papers were circulating in the MOD, saying that up to 10 regiments may have to be cut because of the shortfall of about 8,000 men. The Secretary of State quickly denied that, but a curious thing happened during the campaign: the Chief Secretary to the Treasury attacked the Conservative party and our pledge to make it a priority to restore the Army to its full manning strength. We were told by the Labour party that that commitment would cost £1.3 billion more than the current budgetary provision. Will the Secretary of State tell us whether the Labour party, aided by the Treasury, is right to say that meeting that commitment, which is a strategic defence review requirement, will cost £1.3 billion more than is budgeted? Will it cost that much to get 8,000 men back into the Army, or is it that, as ever, the Treasury might have got its figures wrong? Will he tell us one way or the other? I shall even give way to him, if he would like to answer. He does not want to do so.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): He does not have the money.

Mr. Duncan Smith: He does not have the money or the answer.

The biggest issue on which we want to focus in this debate is that the Government appear to have learned nothing about what the public think have gone wrong. The public are fed up with spin and relaunch, which are what the Government seem to live by. Indeed, they continued to do so even during the election and are doing so now. We hear continual spin from the Secretary of State for Defence about defence budget increases, but the fact remains that defence spending has fallen since 1997 and is still falling as a percentage of gross domestic product. The increases that he managed to secure in last year's comprehensive spending review are far outweighed by the within-budget savings that have been made on efficiency, asset sales and allocations for smart procurement.

If the picture is so rosy, why did a leaked internal Ministry of Defence document entitled "Short Term Plan (STP)/Equipment Plan (EP) 2001" clearly show that the Government propose, as was reported,

"to reduce the cost of the planned equipment programme by some £1.2 billion over the four-year period 2001-2 to 2004-05"?

Will the Secretary of State please tell us why that figure chimes so closely with the figure produced by the Treasury, which said that full manning would cost £1.3 billion?

Even today—and, for that matter, all week—we have found that the Government are continuing their usual practice. Another example of Government spinning relates to the procurement project for aircraft carriers. On Sunday, one of the papers carried a story—of course, the Secretary of State will be asking how it got there—saying that the Government were to confirm that the order for aircraft carriers was going ahead. This morning, the BBC website and even Radio 4 told us that the Secretary of State was to announce today that the order is going ahead.

It appears that the only news that the Government are going to give us is that they are somehow still committed to building the carriers that form the centrepiece of the strategic defence review. However, they need to tell us a bit more. They must tell us where the money is, how much they are prepared to pledge and whether the Chancellor, who is not known for his great love of the defence forces, is prepared to accept that work on the carriers should proceed. For example, we have learned that the funding to be announced for the risk reduction exercise, which is critical to the design of the carriers, will be some £25 million. I hope that the Secretary of State is listening, so that he can provide some answers. However, BAE Systems has pointed out that, under smart procurement, that figure should be nearer £350 million. Will he tell us how much will be invested in that part of the project? Will he give an indication of the Government's commitment, or have they now got cold feet? It is no good him shaking his head. There is no order for the carriers, even though they have been relaunched four or five times since they were first trailed in the strategic defence review.

The announcement on the type 45 was made last year, but there has been no decision. We were even told that the order was placed in December, but no single part of those ships has yet been worked on and we have no idea when that will happen. The Navy has no replacement ship on the horizon, does not know when it will arrive and is slipping behind on the programme. The shipyards that were supposed to be building the vessels—especially Vospers—are no closer to knowing whether they can withdraw the redundancy notices that they sent out, or whether they will have to let go of employees. That is the most tragic part of the situation.

This week, there was another reannouncement—this one was unbelievable—about the A400M project. From the way in which the Government have talked about it, one would think that they were buying a thousand of the aircraft. In the Secretary of State's great announcement, nobody mentioned that the number of aircraft to be bought has been cut from 288 two years ago to only 212 this week. How many more will be cut before the next piece of paper is signed but the Government fail to place the order again? It is only an memorandum of understanding anyway, so there is no fixed purpose of procuring those aircraft and no contract.

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

Doubts still remain about the Germans' commitment to the project. They are supposed to be buying some 73 of the aircraft. Does the Secretary of State honestly think that they will ante up to that? BAE has said that if the number falls below 180, the project will no longer be viable, and we are not far from that number now. When will the Secretary of State get round to ordering something and to being firm about what will be bought? I warned him last year that if he did not do something soon, companies such as BAE would be in crisis over what will happen next.

My right hon. and hon. Friends know that this is a cynical Government, but—cynicism of all cynicisms—just two days before the election a wonderful £120 million contract was signed for the Rosyth dockyard to refit the aircraft carrier HMS *Illustrious*. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence should be careful about smiling about that, because his constituency of Kirkcaldy is close by. However, the one person whose constituency will really benefit just happens to be the Chancellor himself. Why could not the Government have left the announcement for the day after the election? It is an example of the Government's use of pork barrel politics. No wonder the public are fed up of politicians when the cynicism of the Government reaches such new heights. [Interruption.] I am glad that the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) is in his place and is now able to speak. It has been so long since we have heard from him—and the right hon. Member for Dewsbury—that I wondered whether they had lost their voices. In the next few days, they may wish that they had.

The Government clearly have no answers on those points, so I shall move on to the issue of the European army or rapid reaction force. The formation of that force, which has been driven by this Government, represents a break with foreign and defence policy in place since the second world war. It does so in a way that—I believe—the Government and the other nations of Europe will come to regret.

At the NATO summit last week, President Bush said that he would

"support the concept so long as it doesn't undermine NATO, so long as the notion of ESDP is one that is added value to NATO."

However, there can be no doubt that the Government are embarked on a divisive process that will undermine NATO. Non-EU members, such as Turkey, have been excluded from the force and planning for operations will take place independently of the NATO framework. The Defence Secretary has admitted as much himself. Much concern is felt in the US about the issue, as over here.

Despite the President's carefully chosen—as ever—words, it is worth considering the thoughts of a previous director of the CIA, James Wolsey, who was in office under the Democrats. He recently noted:

"The one and only thing that the United States asked of our European friends was not to establish a separate and independent military planning capability. And, of course, that is precisely what they did."

The USA has, rightly, asked European nations in NATO to be able to do more and better, and to be able to get more men and equipment to the place they are required. None of that is happening, even over here. Instead, a set of bureaucratic and divisive structures is being created.

For all the talk about improving European defence capability and strengthening the NATO alliance, the fact is that EU defence spending is falling. A recent report by the Institute of Strategic Studies said that it was falling by 5 per cent. a year in constant dollar terms, so I do not know how the Government have the cheek to tell us that the programme will improve the defence capability of the European nations. No one else sees it like that. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe said, the terrible future that lies ahead is one of a growing gap between north America and Europe, driven by those on the continent and some here who see the process as one of simply counterbalancing America as a hyperpower.

One issue that is a test of the Government's attitude is missile defence. The Labour party hardly dealt with the subject during the election. It is perhaps the most important strategic subject, and the Government may come to rue their position. In the Labour manifesto there was little more than a waffly statement about waiting to find out what would be decided by the Americans. The Government have given few public signs that they support the concept of missile defence or even made any attempt to explain why they do not.

The most worrying feature is something that other of my hon. Friends may be worried about. The Government still do not put our nuclear deterrent in context or say how it would work within such a defensive shield. In other words, they do not want to talk about it because, as the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) would happily agree, most of the Labour party does not want it. It is absolutely opposed to NMD and does not want the Government to support it. Many of the Labour party's allies in Europe do not want it either, but not all of them. The intriguing thing is that other countries have been much quicker to give the United States the support that allies would normally expect.

Jeremy Corbyn: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that national missile defence would fundamentally undermine all the nuclear peace treaties of the past 40 years? Is it not time that people told the United States to abandon this foolish project and instead work for world disarmament?

Mr. Duncan Smith: It will not surprise the hon. Gentleman to know that I do not agree with that at all. [Interruption.] I am glad to see that he is shocked; otherwise I would be worried. Ballistic missile defence is important. There are unstable nations within striking distance of the United Kingdom, the United States of America and our allies in Europe who have decided that both weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles can be used as weapons of terror. They have already embarked on an arms race and they do not believe that the west has the courage or resolve to see them off.

Even though the hon. Member for Islington, North honourably disagrees with the Secretary of State, there is not a problem with the hon. Gentleman's position. My problem is with the Secretary of State's position, because he privately says to the Americans, "Do not worry; we will be there when you finally need us," but dare not lead the debate in public. That is the most shameful part.

At least in the 1980s, the Government were prepared to put their cards on the table and say that they believed in working with the Americans, but this Government skulk

behind others. The new Italian Government have welcomed NMD. The Polish Government have welcomed it. The Australians have welcomed it. I gather that the Japanese have welcomed it, but the British Government, who are supposedly the best ally of the United States, have not. That is the most pathetic thing: either be for it or against it, but for goodness sake, climb out of the hole and say something.

The Government will not be able to bring the United States along with them on any other subject if on this big subject they are unable to give an indication of their support. Their support is vital. The Government are trapped by their party. One hundred and seventy three Labour Members have signed an early-day motion on national missile defence, which says that they wholly oppose the Government, and I dare say that more will sign it. I shall welcome future debates on the matter.

The Gracious Speech has given us an insight into the challenges that lie ahead for the Government, a Government who have reduced the standing of politicians and politics to such an extent that the turnout at the election was extremely low. People believe that it is no longer important to vote because the Government do not care what Parliament has to say; they care nothing for scrutiny and criticism. They will ride roughshod over any opinion with which they disagree. We will oppose them until we show the British public that they have failed in the things that they promised to do and we chuck them out at the next election.

2.5 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I am grateful for the opportunity to draw to a conclusion this part of the debate on the Gracious Speech devoted to foreign affairs and defence. My intention is to try to take a strategic view of the security and defence interests and set a number of current issues in context.

First, however, may I say what an honour it is for me to have been reappointed as the Secretary of State for Defence? It is a great privilege to work so closely with the men and women of our armed forces and their civilian colleagues. To see them in action—planning complex operations overseas in places such as Sierra Leone, helping to tackle flooding and foot and mouth disease at home—is a lesson in how to get things done efficiently, effectively and successfully. I know that the whole House will agree that they are, man for man and woman for woman, the best in the world—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

Before dealing with more specific defence issues, I congratulate hon. Members, especially those making their maiden speeches today. Having devoted months, and perhaps in some cases years, to their efforts to get here, I am sure that, if my own experience is anything to go by, they were more anxious about their maiden speech than about anything that they encountered either in their selection or, indeed, their election campaigns.

I congratulate, therefore, my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight) on what was an excellent and fluent speech, giving proper praise to his predecessor, Ian Bruce, who all Members will remember as a determined and persistent questioner—he was a very persistent questioner. My hon. Friend also paid proper tribute to the Dorset coastline and to the considerable defence interests in his constituency. I had a particular

view of that combination recently, when I was carried at very high speed in a rigid raider along the coastline by some highly specialist members of the Royal Marines who were based not too far away. I look forward to arranging a similar visit for the new Member in due course.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes) on his excellent maiden speech. With his predecessor, he obviously shares a love of history. His affectionate description of hard-working Chesterfield was a complete answer to those *The Times* columnists who appear to want the whole of Derbyshire to look like a Posy Simmonds cartoon. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will represent Chesterfield very well—during this Parliament.

The hon. Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer) chose not to follow parliamentary tradition in his maiden speech. He did mention the civil war, however, when across the east midlands parliamentary forces achieved great successes against those who sought to subvert parliamentary democracy, ensuring that the newly elected Member for Newark was able to make his speech today. Perhaps, if I may say so, he might have named his son Oliver.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Ann Taylor) gave a maiden speech of a different kind, addressing the House directly for the first time in three years. She did so with her characteristic clarity. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills will deal with her observations during the debate on Monday. However, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary asked me to deal specifically with one issue raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury: less reputable immigration advisers. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary informs me that the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 contains new powers to regulate immigration advisers and immigration lawyers. Furthermore, powers brought into force earlier this year will have an increasing effect and impact.

Yet another variety of maiden speech was delivered by the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), back on the field after being sent off by the electors of Bury and now in new colours for North-East Bedfordshire. Such were his personal qualities in his previous incarnation that he was always a well-liked Minister, despite always being associated with the introduction of the Child Support Agency. I met him one day in London during a European election campaign and asked him why, unlike his ministerial colleagues, he was not out electioneering. He ruefully pointed out that, as Minister for the CSA, none of the Conservative candidates wanted him anywhere near them. I wish him well on his return.

There was a final maiden speech—that of a leadership pretender. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) provided an interesting insight into what kind of leader he could be. His speech was wholly and completely negative. We will know what he is against, but we will not have the slightest idea of what he is in favour of. He had valuable parliamentary time in which to set out his thoughts, after an election defeat, about what might be the Conservative party's policy on defence and foreign affairs. I should have thought those subjects suitable for a man who wishes to lead his party and, presumably, the country one day, but we heard nothing—not a word, phrase or sentence—that gave us

[Mr. Geoffrey Hoon]

the slightest idea of what he is for. We heard a lot of knocking copy and negative criticism, without any sense of what he might actually believe in. It is a matter of regret that he did not take that opportunity to inform the House about his thoughts and what he is for, as opposed to what he is against.

As I have said, I want to deal with the Government's defence policy in its strategic context. The world is no longer threatened by an east-west confrontation. The cold war is over and is now a decade behind us. The world has moved on since those times. We now face a diverse range of challenges to our national, regional and global security. We need to continue to shift our thinking from that dangerous, if relatively predictable, past to the challenges and opportunities of a much less certain future.

We know that the threats that we face will become more diverse. At the same time, they will probably be less likely to involve interstate wars between similarly armed, conventionally equipped military forces. Where conflicts do occur, they may be prolonged, but probably at lower levels of intensity. During the cold war, we faced predominantly high-intensity, conventional threats. We must now also consider the risks from drugs, terrorism and international crime. There is a significant technological risk that the information age could leave us vulnerable to new forms of attack, and we face the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to nations or groups who might use them against us or against each other.

In the Balkans and elsewhere, we face instabilities and tensions that could continue to threaten European security. Further work is needed to ensure the former Soviet states' integration into a peaceful and prosperous world order. Further afield—for example, in Africa—environmental, demographic, economic and social changes and pressures will also threaten security. They in turn will lead to pressures for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.

Facing such an unpredictable future means that we need to emphasise the importance of the armed forces' flexibility and responsiveness. We need to minimise the risks to security, by addressing their origins and managing their consequences.

Globalisation has become a fact of life. It necessarily involves a more important role for the international community. Multinational coalitions and organisations will need to be still more effective in responding to the emerging security challenges. That means supporting the United Nations, modernising NATO and developing the European Union's ability to contribute. Increasingly, we will need to build flexible multinational and bilateral relations with other nations to be prepared to deal with the problems both before and as they arise.

That is not to say that there are no longer direct and obvious threats to international security. Saddam Hussein reminds us that some nations are still pursuing an expansionist agenda favoured by tyrants down the ages. We have to be ready to handle such threats to international security and human rights. The security environment is, therefore, far from benign. The risks we face are more complex, less predictable and harder to deal with than those we faced during the cold war.

Where does the United Kingdom fit in to all this? The United Kingdom is a major European state; a leading member of the European Union; a major trading nation; and a member of the UN Security Council, the G8, NATO and the Commonwealth. It is, therefore, no surprise that we have an interest in dealing with the full range of today's challenges. Our national security depends on promoting international stability, particularly in Europe, and also more widely. However, we also have a responsibility to lead the international community in responding to the risks that I have mentioned. We have the skills to do so. We have perhaps the most respected armed forces in the world. We are able to make a real difference as a force for good.

When the Government came to power in 1997, we recognised that changes around the world meant that we needed to adjust the range and capabilities of our armed forces to meet new challenges. We recognised that we would usually find ourselves acting alongside other like-minded countries on the international stage, not necessarily alone. We recognised the need to switch from the static structures of the cold war to a flexible, rapidly deployable expeditionary capability.

The strategic defence review did that and did more. It looked far into the 21st century to provide a vision of the role of our armed forces in a changing world. That vision remains valid today, although it was always intended to be dynamic, not set in stone. We will continue to adjust our detailed plans for implementing the SDR to ensure that they remain fully relevant in the light of experience and the developing strategic context.

The SDR re-examined the broad roles and missions that faced our forces. It recognised the growing importance of international peace, support and humanitarian operations. It acknowledged the value of defence diplomacy, using the skills of our armed forces and civil servants to build trust and prevent conflict.

Those conclusions have subsequently been borne out in Kosovo, the Gulf, Sierra Leone and East Timor—places where we have worked with other nations to help people who cannot always help themselves.

The SDR conclusions are borne out when we consider Macedonia today. NATO and the United Kingdom remain ready to assist the Macedonian Government in reaching a political agreement with the ethnic Albanian minority and to play a part in implementing it with military force if necessary. We appreciate the continuing role that Macedonia plays in supporting our operations in the Balkans, and hope that all parties will work constructively to resolve the current problems.

The SDR also recognised the need for new and improved military capabilities, such as strategic lift by sea and by air. It appreciated the need to change force structures and achieve greater flexibility through more joint formations, such as joint force Harrier, the joint helicopter command and the joint nuclear, biological and chemical defence regiment.

The ultimate expression of that joint approach is the joint rapid reaction force—a pool of powerful, versatile forces drawn from all three services that can be deployed to crises at short notice. Elements of the JRRF have already been deployed effectively to East Timor, Kosovo and Sierra Leone. Indeed, in Sierra Leone, the first paratroopers were patrolling Lungi airport within hours of the decision to deploy.

The JRRF concept will be demonstrated again this autumn, through a major exercise—Saif Saréa 2—in Oman with the Sultan's armed forces. It will be our largest exercise for many years. The UK contribution will include more than 20,000 personnel, a naval carrier task group, nuclear submarines, armoured and commando brigades and around 50 aircraft, including C-17s and Tornado GR4s. Few other nations could achieve that level of activity. It also shows our commitment to providing the best possible training for our armed forces.

We are therefore making excellent progress in implementing the SDR. More than half the key measures are now in place. However, it is a long-term process. We always planned that it would not be completed until well into the next decade.

The introduction of new equipment is a good example. The SDR acknowledged that new kit was required to give our forces the required expeditionary capability. It recognised the need for more and better investment to improve efficiency and release more resources for the right capabilities.

On Tuesday in Paris, I signed agreements with European partners on the A400M transport aircraft and the Meteor air-to-air missile. United Kingdom industry has a key part to play in those two programmes; A400M alone will create up to 8,000 jobs in the UK.

I was asked why there was a change in the number of orders for A400Ms. The answer is simple: the United Kingdom's requirement has not changed, but other countries inevitably change their requirements from time to time. It is inevitable that the details of a multinational purchase of a complex, sophisticated aircraft will be resolved over time. That is the history of such projects. If the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green intends that we should never engage in such projects, despite their considerable benefits to our industry, he should state the position of a Conservative Government in the unlikely event of their being elected.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will answer the question that I asked earlier and more than a year ago. When does the contract cease to be viable? Numbers have fallen to 196. That is only 16 above the line that British Aerospace has set. It claims that anything below that is not viable. Everyone wants the aircraft to be produced, but the Secretary of State should tell us the point at which the contract becomes unviable.

Mr. Hoon: If the hon. Gentleman had studied the details that were set out in Paris more carefully, he would know that there was a fixed price for the aircraft, and that some contractual negotiations have to be resolved with the prime contractor. Clearly, I would not have signed the memorandum of understanding on behalf of the United Kingdom if I was not confident that the project would go ahead. I think that that is a complete answer to the hon. Gentleman's question.

It has never been intended that the A400M would be a short-term solution to our strategic lift needs. That is why, in the meantime, the first C17 strategic transport aircraft for the RAF arrived at Brize Norton last month, just a year and a day after we announced our intention to acquire the aircraft, and ahead of the contracted date. Together with six new roll on/roll off ferries and four logistics ships to support our amphibious and expeditionary capability, C17 and A400M represent significant increases in our strategic lift capability.

Other major programmes are on the horizon: the future joint combat aircraft, JSF; the future strategic tanker aircraft; and the future offensive air system, in which we are looking years ahead to new technologies and concepts that will significantly enhance the capabilities of our armed forces. Our warship building programme will involve more than 30 ships in the next 15 to 20 years. At the heart of this programme are two new aircraft carriers, to which the Government are fully committed. They will be among the largest warships that the Royal Navy has ever had, and they will be built here in the United Kingdom. With the future joint combat aircraft, they will deliver a formidable force projection capability.

The outline of this new equipment—the envy of most other armed forces anywhere in the world—is not one that we would recognise from recent media coverage or from the efforts of the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green to run down and criticise this programme. There have been inaccurate reports of cuts in Army regiments and cutbacks for the Royal Navy, all of which have been gleefully seized on by the hon. Gentleman, who asked, perhaps rhetorically, why defence had not featured in the general election campaign. I understand that he churned out several press releases every day in a vain effort to interest some of the newspapers in his more extreme claims, but, so far as I could see, they all chose to ignore his ramblings. Perhaps that was because they could not take entirely seriously the claims that he was making.

The reality of what is happening is entirely different. In the past year, the Army has been doing excellent work in Sierra Leone, the Balkans, Northern Ireland and, with the other services, at home in response to flooding and foot and mouth disease. The Royal Navy and Royal Marines have supported 12 short-notice operations, sent amphibious and carrier forces to Sierra Leone, carried out a global deployment, and played a major role in Kosovo and Northern Ireland. The Royal Air Force has continued to fly operational missions over the no-fly zones in Iraq and in the Balkans, provided air defence and air support in the Falklands, deployed to Sierra Leone, and kept up a permanent search and rescue service in the United Kingdom. These do not look like forces that are suffering from a series of cuts.

Mr. Quentin Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hoon: Before I give way, I want to deal with the point made by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), who mentioned Iraqi claims of casualties as a result of patrols in the no-fly zones. He should recall that the Iraqi regime has routinely claimed casualties on days when allied planes have not even been in the sky. However, I am aware that, on a particular occasion recently, allied aircraft came under attack from Iraqi missiles. Fortunately, none of those missiles hit their intended targets, but one missile was seen to return to the ground, exploding in what was clearly a populated area. Once again, it appears that the people of Iraq have suffered at the hands of Saddam Hussein's regime.

Mr. Davies: We, of course, strongly support the Government on Iraq, and I am sorry that the Liberal Democrats have become soft on that issue—perhaps

[Mr. Davies]

characteristically so. The Secretary of State has set out a number of operations in which our armed forces are doing magnificently, but they are doing magnificently on the basis of numbers that are too low, of being overstretched and of equipment often not coming through. Does the Secretary of State deny the point that I made earlier, which was that the Royal Navy and the RAF are short of 125 combat pilots, that the situation is—on the Government's own projections—getting worse, and that they are going to be short of 132 pilots next year and more than that thereafter? Does the right hon. Gentleman deny that? If he does not deny it, what is he doing about it?

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman gets so excited about these issues. He will recall that I set out clearly and calmly the precise problem that we face as far as pilots in the RAF are concerned. It is a problem being faced by air forces all round the world. There is an airline company at the moment offering £50,000 to recruit new pilots, and it has proved very difficult for military air forces to compete with that kind of inducement.

Nevertheless, as I set out to the House in a detailed statement about that problem, we are addressing it by providing retention bonuses and other financial incentives, which are beginning to have some effect. That takes time, and I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that, having set the matter out shortly before the general election campaign, we have not achieved immediate progress, which perhaps explains his hysterical response. However, we are addressing the issue, as are other air forces around the world.

The point that the hon. Gentleman needs to consider carefully before making such criticisms is, were they accurate, whether the armed forces would be able to conduct operations of such range and quality as those that they carried out last year. I am confident that the armed forces will continue to produce that magnificent effort with the support that they have received from the Government.

Indeed, as the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green mentioned it, I remind the House that, thanks to the prudence and the efforts of the Chancellor, the Government have provided the first sustained real-terms increase in the defence budget in years—£1.25 billion of new money over and above inflation. *[Interruption.]* I hear sedentary comments from Conservative Members such as, "Tiny in real terms." They supported a Government who slashed the defence budget by more than 20 per cent. over and over again. How they can sit there and complain about a real-terms increase over and above inflation beggars belief.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I have a simple question. In 1997, did the Secretary of State's Government take over a budget that sat at 2.7 per cent. of gross domestic product? Is not it now nearly 2.4 per cent. of GDP?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that, since 1997, there has been a significant improvement in the overall budget available to the Government, because of our extremely good economic record. Therefore, he

must concentrate on the real-terms increase and the amount spent on defence—not just in one year, but in three. If he had the slightest decency and the slightest interest in considering the matter positively, he would agree with and approve of it, instead of sitting there criticising the increase despite having supported a Government who cut defence.

I emphasise that the strategic defence review was based, above all else, on the quality of the people in the armed forces. Reducing the operational commitment faced by our armed forces was one of my first personal priorities when I became Secretary of State and, this year, there has been a continued recovery from the exceptionally high operational tempo of 1999. Average intervals between operational tours for units in the infantry, artillery and armoured corps have all showed significant improvements, and that has been helped by improvements in retention. Outflow from the regular forces decreased by 6.3 per cent. in 2000-01 compared with the previous year.

I shall ensure that the hon. Member for Newark is kept up to date with all the latest statistics, because I am sure that he will play a regular part in Defence questions. I welcome his contribution.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): Will the Secretary of State revisit the carriers, because there has been enormous press speculation in the past few days? If he cannot say anything more concrete than what he announced today, can he tell the House by which month this year, or by which year, he will be able to place firm orders for the two carriers?

Mr. Hoon: We are in the middle of a development programme for two sophisticated carriers. To answer one of the points put to me earlier, the money is in the budget. That programme will continue. It is a carefully staged process to ensure that we have the right equipment for those sophisticated vessels. Nothing has changed, so, notwithstanding press speculation, which, originally, was in the negative, I am able to say that there has been no change in the Government's position.

Dr. Julian Lewis: If the Secretary of State cannot give us a firm date for a firm order for the carriers, can he give us a firm date for a firm order for the Bowman system, in particular because Thales, which has nearly 15,000 employees in about 500 constituencies around the country, including mine, has made a strong bid? We would very much like an answer.

Mr. Hoon: As the hon. Gentleman should know, there are a number of competing bids for the Bowman project. I hope to be able to reach a resolution in due course, but I am not going to give him a firm date at this stage, nor am I going to tell him who is likely to be the winner, as that has still to be decided.

The world is changing, as are the challenges facing defence and how we respond to them. The Government have recognised those changes. That is why we have set in hand, through the strategic defence review—

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed Monday.

General Election (Turnout)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. Caplin.]

2.30 pm

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North): As a member of the recovering Whips group in this House, may I say what a great pleasure it is to stand in the bosom of the Back Benches after four years serving Her Majesty's Whips Office? When one makes a second maiden speech, as this may well be portrayed, one thinks carefully about the topic. It could have been a constituency topic or one of great national significance. After the 2001 general election, no issue is more important than the health of our democracy, so I chose on this occasion to enter that topic in the Adjournment debate ballot and I was fortunate enough to have my name picked.

The issue is important because in the last general election the very underpinnings of our democracy were seen to be creaking—to some degree threatened not by the great landslide that the Labour party achieved again, but by the very low voter turnout. The bald figures are quite frightening: the overall turnout was down nationally to 59.5 per cent., while in my constituency the turnout was a shocking 46 per cent., which frightened me and other colleagues who were out on election night.

I pay tribute to those friends, colleagues and workers of all parties who participated not only in my general election victory in Nottingham, North but throughout the country. We shall come to rue the fact that political activists are disparaged, often by the media, because those people are the very life-blood of our democracy. We should encourage people from all parties who play their part in public life by engaging in political activity locally. We must ensure that they feel that what they are doing is important.

Our democracy is not a given; it is a fragile flower. It needs to be looked after—it needs care and maintenance. It is incumbent on the Government, let alone Parliament, to look at the underlying causes of the low voter turnout and consider future action. The problem is that many people voted with their feet, rather than with crosses on ballot papers, and we need to address that problem.

It is sad that such a debate has to be raised by a Back Bencher, however new and however fortunate, rather than by the Government. It says something about Parliament and the Government's control of it that the Government do not have a day when we debrief after a general election and when, without votes or party acrimony, individuals across the spectrum—new and experienced Members from both sides of the House as well as Ministers—say, "How was it for you? How was the general election and what can we do to improve the next one?" We should look at all those matters. Perhaps our new Leader of the House might consider such an innovation after the next general election. We could have an open day, when people could express, perhaps under a 10-minute limit, what they feel could be done better next time for the health of our democracy.

We could take a number of steps straight away—we could certainly make a number of quick fixes. One of them is postal voting. I was delighted that the postal vote was more readily available this time around, as I have campaigned for that. However, there is still much more

that we can do. The Home Office got its act together very late in the day, so there were varying interpretations of the vague guidance that it issued. Some local registration officers and local councils went to town and accommodated large numbers of people who wanted a postal vote, whereas others interpreted the regulations more strictly and the numbers of postal votes were not as great as they could have been. The Government, together with local authorities, could give clearer guidance, with a stronger and more powerful campaign to sell postal voting. Our fellow electors who wish to avail themselves of a postal vote should be enabled to do so.

Another old chestnut that is worth considering is compulsory voting. In Australia, there is a \$50 fine for people who do not vote. It is perfectly acceptable not to vote if people have a genuine reason, in which case the fine is waived. Australia has shown a lead. I am not recommending that we go down that road, but the Government and the House should consider compulsory voting as one of the alternatives to the present system.

Other theories include weekend voting. There is no reason why we should have to vote on a Thursday, given the disruption it causes in schools and elsewhere. We could perhaps extend voting over a weekend. Experiments have already taken place with voting in supermarkets and other places. The ability to register more easily was also tried in the last Parliament. The innovative suggestion has been made in recent weeks to give either a tax credit or a council tax voucher to the value of a small sum by way of carrot, rather than the compulsory voting stick. All those options must be considered.

We must be careful not to seek a panacea. I hope that all hon. Members have matured enough over the issue of proportional representation to realise that there are no perfect systems, no panaceas and no cure-alls. We should examine the options that could free up people's ability to vote whenever they wish. No obstacle should be placed in their way.

The young are now into the electronic age, which is quite frightening for an oldster like me. We should consider digital voting, internet voting and internet registration. Experiments have taken place in the United States on those possibilities, and perhaps they would influence young people to vote more often.

Welcome and urgent as a review of such technical fixes may be—I urge the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead), to press the case in his Department and in the Home Office—we must also look deeper into the reasons why so many of our fellow citizens decided not to bother to vote at the general election.

I was fortunate enough to speak to a group of students at the London school of economics on Monday. I asked them to help me to write this Adjournment debate speech and to come up with their thoughts on why people stayed at home. Their list of reasons was much the same as any list that would undoubtedly be drawn up if hon. Members got together in the Tea Room or colleagues in the constituencies got together around a table in the pub—it included the apathy that pervades British society. We all know that the day of the public meeting is pretty much dead.

There was also media overkill. We are constantly being told by the media that there is too much coverage, when they are responsible for the excessive coverage. The hon.

[Mr. Graham Allen]

Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) takes a particular interest in the polls and whether we should consider a moratorium on polling within a number of weeks of election day, as happens in some countries.

Another factor was the cynicism that pervades our political life. We all enjoy an in-joke when we exaggerate and appear to be wounded by comments from the other side. We understand it, but people outside often do not, and they see our work, our jobs and our political life in a cynical light.

I also believe that because of the way the election was covered, and because of various other political circumstances, many electors felt that the result was a foregone conclusion. Voters in a number of areas felt that their votes would not matter: the polls were steady, and it was pretty clear that a significant majority would again back Labour.

Those are some of the possible reasons for the low turnout. We might all describe them as having variable degrees of validity, but we need to tackle them. I mentioned young people earlier. I do not know about other Members' experience in this regard, but I visited every polling station in my constituency, as I know others often do. I could count the number of people under 30 on the fingers of both hands. It may just have been me, and it may have had to do with the times at which I visited the polling stations, but I was worried by the age profile of those voting as well as by the overall totals.

Good work has been done in this regard by the National Youth Agency, which, along with the Local Government Association, is issuing standards in an attempt to involve young people in the electoral process. I think it is incumbent on us all to ensure—perhaps by pressing Education Ministers—that people are aware of the importance of our democracy and its fragility, and know that they too must be vigilant in its defence.

The National Youth Agency's key finding was that young people considered the election to be irrelevant, and felt that it would not make much difference to their lives. That is why we need to look again at the way we present ourselves, both in the House and when we are out campaigning. We need to ensure that people out there feel that what we do is important and relevant.

I am afraid we have reached the point at which young people think that not voting is cool and fashionable. If I had said something like that to my father I would have had a flea in my ear very rapidly, and a lecture to boot about the suffragettes and other instances in which, over the years, people had fought for the vote. I dare say that other Members would have been given the same treatment. That feeling does not exist now, however: the cynicism of the media compounds the view that it is cool not to vote. We must make people believe again that voting is important.

How should we go about that? What we need is a fitness programme to restore democracy to good health. That means that the present position, in which a muscle-bound Executive or Government kick sand in the face of the six-stone weakling called Parliament, local government and regional governance, must be restored to some sort of balance. Responsibility for that now rests with Government. There is a growing consensus in this place that we need to hold the Executive to account, but,

whether we like it or not—I speak as a recovering Whip—it is Government who control this place and its agenda. Only 10 per cent. of the agenda is devoted to private Members; the rest is allocated, in one way or another, as Government time.

My plea is not to colleagues present in the Chamber but to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House. Action is needed now. We must view electors as citizens, not merely consumers of an election campaign. There are a number of ways in which we can set about that.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is here. He has an impressive record in local government, he cares about local government, and he knows a great deal about local government. That is unusual in this place.

Our local parties are the life-blood of our democracy. If we allow our local activism—that sense of the importance of public service, public duty and community involvement—to atrophy, our national politics will eventually wither. I believe that one of the answers is to restore to local people the strength, resources and powers to enable them to make decisions that affect their own lives. All decisions that should be made locally must be made locally—I am talking about the beautiful concept that is summed up by that ugliest of words, subsidiarity. As a Government, we need to strengthen our local institutions, so that the grass roots—the life of our politics—are sustained and enhanced. That involves a raft of things, which may be beyond the ambit of today's ministerial reply but is fundamental.

We need to make Parliament itself more relevant; it should not be just the creature of the Executive. Of course, as a member of my party, my desire is to use this place to get our manifesto commitments through the House. I will continue to support that day in, day out. However, because of the threat that low turnout poses, it is ever more vital, not just for parliamentarians but for Government to tackle the issue of giving space inside this place to hon. Members so that they can express themselves, represent their constituencies, act as a sounding board and ventilate their views. They cannot do that currently with the limited space that is allowed for non-Government business.

We sit for a given number of days. There is space in the parliamentary calendar. If the will is there, this place, rather than the "Today" or "Newsnight" studios, could become the forum of representation and democracy. I hope that the new Leader of the House in particular will take those remarks to heart. The way we conduct ourselves in the House is now a Government problem, not just a parliamentary problem.

I could range wider and talk about the need to involve electors at different levels—at a regional level, through the second Chamber and elsewhere. We must get back to the idea that the electors own and control this system, that they do not have just one day once every four or five years, and that they are permanent and active shareholders in our system.

I hope that the Minister will consider at some point the possibility of having a public or parliamentary inquiry into how we can pull it all together. I was gratified to hear the remarks of the Leader of the Opposition—one gets only one farewell speech in the debate on the Queen's Speech. He chose to use it to outline a series of reforms for this place and was supported by the leader of the Liberal Democrats. An eminent bunch of Back Benchers have signed various motions and letters asking that we

put together a package. Perhaps a number of the people who are no longer going to be that actively involved—the former general secretary of the Labour party, who has just resigned, eminent former Cabinet members such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith), and the Leader of the Opposition—could form the core and nucleus, perhaps under a Speaker's Conference or some institutional arrangement, and look urgently at how to tackle the problem of very low voter turnout.

If that trend continues, our life could continue as it is—this little, isolated, esoteric life that we live here, immune often from what is going on outside—but my worry is that, in two or three elections' time, the participation rate will be very, very low. I mean no disrespect to the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) or to those who elected him, but we will see odd, independent, single-issue candidates coming through. As we saw in Oldham, parties may start from a very low base, but it does not take many thousands of disenchanted, alienated people to pose a serious threat to the stability that we have enjoyed in this democracy.

There are extremists, racists and others. I do not particularly approve of the British tradition of throwing eggs and tomatoes at leading politicians. However, it is more acceptable than throwing petrol bombs. If very few people feel that they own the process, more and more people will take ever more drastic action.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary to the Front Bench. I hope that he impresses so much in performing his duties at the Department that he will be put in his rightful place of Minister for Local Government in the not too distant future. I also hope that he will not lose his radicalism; I am sure that he will not. However, I also tell him that if we get it wrong on this issue, not only will the electorate not forgive us but they will continue to walk away from us.

2.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Dr. Alan Whitehead): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) for initiating this debate, for his thoughtful comments on the subject and for his kind words to me. In the short time available, it would be difficult to do justice to a very wide-ranging and important subject. Moreover, as he demonstrated again today, my hon. Friend has a long and detailed interest in all aspects of the democratic process. His interesting thoughts about an open day in Parliament and a royal commission on voter turnout were typical of him.

We seem to have something of a turnout problem in the Chamber today, and perhaps we ourselves have something to learn about the need for participation in the democratic process. Nevertheless, it is useful to set the debate in context. The United Kingdom is not alone in experiencing declining turnouts, which are a feature in democracies throughout the western world. Turnout is declining across both Europe and the United States. In some places it is declining from an already low level. In others, such as in the United Kingdom, it is a shock to discover that traditionally high levels of voter participation are being reversed.

Turnouts in the United Kingdom remained remarkably steady until the 1997 general election. However, since 1992, when there was a reasonably respectable

77.7 per cent. turnout, the decline has been marked. There was a 6.5 per cent. decrease in 1997, and the provisional figures show a 12 per cent. decrease in the most recent general election. Although various pundits have already claimed to know the reasons for the decline, I think that the reasons are complex. Nevertheless, no one with the interests of the democratic process in the United Kingdom at heart can be at all happy about the decline. It seems that something is going seriously wrong in the relationship between voters and the democratic process.

We may not be able to say what causes low turnouts, but we know something about high ones. What emerges from the general election statistics and from similar statistics on local government is that a close contest is a good predictor of a high turnout. In four of the six highest election turnouts since the second world war, the difference in the vote between the two major contesting parties was either 1 per cent. or 3 per cent. They were very close contests. Additionally, Professors Rallings and Thrasher of Plymouth university have worked on turnout in local elections. They have shown that turnout is invariably higher in wards where the result is in doubt and the seat could go either way. We can therefore say both that voters are more likely to turn out if the contest is likely to be close, and that turnouts in safe wards or constituencies are getting lower.

It is clear that voters turn out when they think that the circumstances merit it. Nevertheless, it is arguable that circumstances always merit turning out, that the citizen's first duty is to participate in the democratic process, and that without that participation, the citizen is effectively reducing herself to the position of a serf. She is abdicating responsibility for the decisions taken about her life and future.

Conversely, democracy brings with it the right not to take part. I am not sure that compulsory voting sits easily with that principle. What should concern us is that the legitimacy of any Government is threatened when so many people are turned off and feel that they cannot or do not wish to take part. Ultimately, democracy could become meaningless. What is needed is for civic pride and responsible citizenship to be encouraged and nurtured so that the principle of democratic participation is valued for what it is—not only the most important duty of the citizen, but part of a wider process of personal engagement in the civic process.

My hon. Friend has mentioned several examples of the Government's efforts to encourage people to participate and to revive the democratic process. Indeed, the working party on electoral procedures that the Government set up after the 1997 general election under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) had a remit to review electoral arrangements and recommend changes in electoral practice that would result in fairer and more open procedures, command the trust of the electorate and contribute to democratic renewal.

The working party commissioned papers and received representations, and the result was the Representation of the People Act 2000, which contains various measures aimed at making it easier and more convenient to register and to cast a vote, including the introduction of rolling registration, provisions to help the homeless, postal voting on demand, and provisions to help disabled voters. All those changes make it easier to vote or to register to

[Dr. Alan Whitehead]

vote, the theory being that the easier and more convenient we make it, the more likely voters are to take advantage of it.

The most significant part of the Act in the context of turnout was the provision for pilot projects to test new voting arrangements, which took place in 32 local authorities and included early voting—opening polling stations at a couple of places in the local authority area for a couple of days the weekend before the traditional Thursday polling day—polling stations in novel places, electronic voting, mobile ballot boxes and all-postal voting.

Each authority was required to set up arrangements to evaluate its projects and make the results publicly available. I have to say that the general results were disappointing, showing only small percentage increases. However, as my hon. Friend said, there were dramatic increases in the all-postal voting pilots. The results should be treated with caution, because the experiments were run in only a few wards in a few local authority areas, and we certainly need some more experiments, perhaps on a larger scale, to see whether they might provide a basis for optimism.

Further pilot schemes are needed to test the new ways of voting more thoroughly. We also need more information about the security aspects of postal voting, and of course there are cost considerations. The Government will soon invite local authorities to submit applications to run pilots at next May's local elections, and I hope that many will do so, in an effort to encourage voter engagement.

It is clear that simply making the process easier to take part in is not the overall answer to falling turnout. Voter disengagement is wider than mechanical failure and, as my hon. Friend said, we must address the underlying factors and the wider issues.

How do we re-engage the electorate? I referred earlier to the clear indicator for higher turnout: a close contest. The common denominator of all close contests is intense interest, involvement and activity on the part of political parties. Of course, we cannot engineer close contests all the time. It is fair to say that it was not the Labour Government's fault that there was not a close contest at the general election.

Perhaps we are now trespassing on the lengthy debate on voting systems. The Government have given a commitment to keep voting systems under review, in the light of the different systems for election to the devolved bodies. Indeed, we have made a commitment that if proposals are made to change the voting system, we will have a referendum.

A more far-reaching way in which citizens can be re-energised is by their forming part of a community that is supportive, relevant and meaningful to them. I believe that the lessons of devolution apply here. Voters can see that their representatives are acting for them and taking relevant actions that have a local effect.

Local involvement is indeed the key. It may start with youth or voluntary groups, or with neighbourhood watch, but once citizens become engaged, voting becomes the natural thing to do to make the right things happen. We need to focus on making local democracy relevant to the lives of our citizens. We need to make active citizenship desirable, not a duty. We need to encourage supportive communities that people want to support.

Regional government may certainly have a role to play in increasing the relevance of government to the citizen. Our restructuring of local government can play a part by meeting the needs of local populations more closely.

I thank my hon. Friend for introducing this subject, which is one that we should not shirk. After all, our presence in the House is only as legitimate as the votes of the people who put us here, whatever party they support.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 25 June 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

MR. SPEAKER'S ABSENCE

The House being met, the Clerk at the Table informed the House of the absence of Mr. SPEAKER from this day's sitting, pursuant to leave given on 21 June.

Whereupon, Sir ALAN HASELHURST, THE CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS, proceeded to the Table, and after Prayers, took the Chair as DEPUTY SPEAKER, pursuant to the Standing Order.

Member Sworn

The following Member made the Affirmation required by law:

John William Patrick Smith, for Vale of Glamorgan.

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Before I call the first hon. Member, may I remind the House of Mr. Speaker's recommendation that he expects questions and answers to be short and concise? We can thus proceed more briskly through Question Time, to the advantage of all hon. Members. I would appreciate hon. Members' co-operation; let us start as we perhaps mean to go on through the Parliament.

Social Fund

1. **Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West):** What plans he has to reform the social fund. [440]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): Since 1997, we have increased the gross discretionary social fund budget by 30 per cent. In 1999, we introduced reforms to make the budgeting loan scheme simpler and faster. Consequently, 82,000 more people got a budgeting loan than in the previous year.

Gareth Thomas: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment to a new and important Department. In view of the heatwave, today may not be the appropriate day to ask this, but will he reconsider the case for extending winter fuel payments to the disabled? Will he re-examine the claim by the predecessor Department that existing

benefits adequately reflect fuel poverty among disabled pensioners, since that is a contention that is disputed by many of my disabled constituents?

Malcolm Wicks: I am sorry to disappoint my hon. Friend, but we have no plans to extend winter fuel allowances to disabled people. However, I hasten to assure him that as the popular and effective winter fuel allowances go to everyone over the age of 60, the majority of people with disabilities are covered. Fuel allowances go to those over 60 because research shows that older people are physiologically most at risk.

Disability benefits, including the disability premium and the disability living allowance, provide extra resources for those with disabilities to meet costs which could include heating.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): May I add my welcome to the Under-Secretary, who is knowledgeable about social security matters and will be a great asset to the team?

I want to take up the theme of winter fuel payments. Today, in lovely weather, the Department issued a press release encouraging people to claim next winter's fuel payments. That is welcome, but does the Under-Secretary accept that there was a big problem with take-up last winter? How many people who were entitled to payments missed out as a result of the imposition of a deadline of 31 March for claims for last winter? How much money did the Government save by imposing that deadline?

Malcolm Wicks: In fact, take-up of winter fuel allowance is very good, but we are not complacent and we will always do more to encourage take-up. I understand that since we do not have names on records for men aged 60 to 65, there may be a particular issue and those people therefore do have to claim. As with all social security rights, we urge everyone to claim what is justly theirs.

Long-term Unemployment

3. **Derek Twigg (Halton):** If he will make a statement on assistance for the long-term unemployed. [442]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Alistair Darling): In the previous Parliament, the new deals and other measures saw growing numbers of people move off benefit and into work. Through the new agency Jobcentre Plus, we shall continue that work in this Parliament. The new agency will provide a new, work-focused service for all benefit recipients of working age, enabling those who can work to do so.

Derek Twigg: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. One of my concerns relates to the ability of people with learning difficulties and those who are suffering from or recovering from mental illness to get into the jobs market when they want to work. As my right hon. Friend knows, work is an important route to social inclusion and we are committed to full employment. Does he agree that there is more scope to improve and build on our support and employment schemes?

Mr. Darling: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. There are a large number of people of working age in this

country who could work given the appropriate help. My hon. Friend may be aware of the workstep programme, which Ministers announced before the last election. It allocated some £37 million extra, which will provide 20,000 places for people who have special difficulties. We expect some 5,000 disabled people to be helped into work through that route. However, my hon. Friend is right: the Government are determined to do far more to ensure that those who are not unemployed as such but who are of working age and could work get into the labour market as soon as possible.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his new title and new responsibilities and wish him every success—within the confines of wishing a political opponent well. I want to start by asking him a very simple question: is it now Government policy to encourage the long-term unemployed on to incapacity benefit?

Mr. Darling: As this is the first Question Time of the Session, may I thank the hon. Gentleman for his good wishes and wish him well no matter who the new leader of the Conservative party may be?

So far as incapacity benefit claimants are concerned, the hon. Gentleman seems to be confusing our policy with that of the previous Conservative Government, which was quite cynically to shift people off unemployment benefit and on to incapacity benefit. That is one of the reasons why so many people—especially older people—are on incapacity benefit. It is the Government's policy, through Jobcentre Plus, to ensure that everyone of working age who could work is helped to get back into work. Indeed, the Queen's Speech announced a welfare reform Bill that will include measures to ensure that more and more people are invited in for interview, so that they can see what options and choices there are to enable them to get back into work. I also attach considerable importance to stopping the trend that developed in the 1980s and early 1990s whereby people who could work and who should have been helped back into work were quite cynically put on to incapacity benefit.

Mr. Pickles: The right hon. Gentleman cannot have been looking at the figures, because there has been a growth in the number of people on incapacity benefit; in the past 18 months that figure has jumped by 65,000. Coincidentally, the figure is at exactly the same level as it was when the Government wrote, in "New ambitions for our country: a new contract for welfare", that incapacity benefit

"has proved a simple, but costly escape route for government to keep the unemployment numbers down".

The numbers are now at exactly the same level as when that document was written. That leaves us to draw three possible conclusions: the nation has become iller under the Labour Government; there has been a policy drift by neglect; or there has been a policy change by stealth. Those figures were considered completely unacceptable in March 1998. Why are identical figures quite acceptable, according to the Secretary of State, today?

Mr. Darling: There is a fourth explanation, and it is the right one. It is that, because more people are living longer and more women are eligible for incapacity benefit than in the past, there has been a 0.3 per cent. increase in

the long-term rate of incapacity benefit claims. It is nothing catastrophic, but the hon. Gentleman is none the less right to draw attention to the fact that all Governments ought to be in the business of making sure that people of working age who can work do so.

One of the reasons why we have introduced the Jobcentre Plus regime, which will ensure everybody of working age has to come in for interview, is that we believe that there are people on incapacity benefit who could work and who could be helped to get back into work. In the past, those people got no help whatever. They simply got a benefit cheque and were told to get on with it. Under the new system, that will not be possible, and we will ensure that everyone who can get into work is given the right help to do so. It cannot be right, as the hon. Gentleman says—I agree with him on this point—that a country such as ours has large numbers of people on incapacity benefit and other non-jobseeker's allowance benefits who could be in work if they were given the right support. That is why we have introduced Jobcentre Plus, the new deals and other measures.

Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North): For 18 years, that lot on the Opposition Benches ripped the heart out of mining communities in my constituency and threw thousands of people out of work, many of whom are still long-term unemployed. Under this Government, unemployment has fallen by 40 per cent. under the new deal. That is an absolutely fabulous start, but there are still pockets in which there is a huge amount of long-term unemployment. Will the Secretary of State tell us what plans he has to help those long-term unemployed people back into work?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right and, representing part of the south Yorkshire coalfield, he knows that many people who lost their jobs in the 1980s went quickly on to incapacity benefit and were simply left there with no help whatever. As I told the House a few moments ago, the Government intend to introduce a new agency—Jobcentre Plus—that will bring together the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency. Its first 50 offices will open this October. People living in those areas will have to come in for a work-focused interview to see what help is available to channel them back into work as quickly as possible. In the following 18 months to two years, all the offices will be converted, and a much tougher regime will be there to help people.

We cannot allow the situation to continue in which many people who could work are simply written off—or allow themselves to be written off—for want of help. That new regime will be introduced and, together with other measures targeted at helping people get back into work, will in time steadily reduce the number of dependent people who could be independent and looking after themselves and their families.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): The Secretary of State is right to promote an active welfare policy that engenders a culture of work, but does he not accept that, if that is pushed too far, he could stigmatise those who are not able to get into the labour market? In particular, is he as concerned as I am about recent figures that show that, leaving aside students and

those on training programmes, some 2.3 million men of working age are economically inactive? What is Government policy to deal with them?

Mr. Darling: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I do not believe that the policy is stigmatising people who cannot work—far from it. He knows that, in the last Parliament, we increased the benefits payable to many people who could not work and had no chance of working. Just as the Government should step up their efforts to ensure that all those who can work do so, we should do more for people who are not able to work. However, I agree that we must also redouble our efforts and increase the help available to those economically inactive people of working age who have been out of work.

That is what Jobcentre Plus and the increased conditionality in the benefit system will achieve, because many people who want to work do not know what help is available to them. Lone parents are a classic example. People said that it was not possible to get more lone parents into work, but we are well on the way to achieving that. We have increased the level of lone parents in work from about 50 per cent. to 70 per cent., which is more akin to levels in comparable countries.

State Pension

4. Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): What recent representations he has received on the level of the state retirement pension. [443]

The Minister for Pensions (Mr. Ian McCartney): We are providing significant extra help for all pensioners, including a £200 winter fuel payment and a minimum income guarantee of more than £92 a week for single pensioners and £140 a week for couples. This year, we have increased the basic state pension by £5 a week for single people and £8 a week for couples. From April 2002, there will be further increases of £3 a week for single people and £4.80 for couples. In total, we are spending £4.4 billion more on pensioners in 2001-02 alone as a result of the changes that we have introduced. That is nearly £3 billion more than if we had restored the earnings link.

Mr. Amess: I welcome the Minister to his new role. Does he recall the Labour leader saying during the general election campaign that one of his biggest regrets was the insulting 75p increase that he gave to our pensioners? Why have the Government still got it in for our pensioners? Will the Minister comment on the official House of Commons Library figures that tell us that there are 500,000 more senior citizens living in poverty since this rotten Government came to power in 1997?

Mr. McCartney: The hon. Gentleman's shouting does not improve the quality of his response to my answer. The truth is that he has some brass neck. The Tory Government doubled means testing and left us a legacy not just of people in poverty, but of a generation of older people in poverty. This Government have tackled poverty in old age. This Government have put in extra spending of £2 billion on the poorest third of pensioners, which is five times more than the earnings link would ever have given them. This Government have introduced the winter

fuel payment, free TV licences and the minimum income guarantee, all of which Conservative Members opposed and still oppose. That is why a lot of them were pensioned off at the election and we were put back into power.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new post. Will he take note of the response that I have received from pensioners who welcome the state retirement pension increase? However, will he also consider the concerns over increased costs for telephones, water and sewerage and carefully monitor energy costs to ensure that pensioners get full value for the £200 winter fuel allowance and receive all that they are entitled to?

Mr. McCartney: The Government will introduce a new pension service whose purpose will be to ensure, quickly and effectively, that pensioners get all the benefits to which they are entitled. That is also true of our work with local government, and we are considering "Better Government for Older People" to achieve improvements in services for older people. In particular, when local government services are being designed, the needs of older people must be taken into account. With those links, in terms of income increases and improvements in services, this Government have become the first in living memory to put pensioners on the right side—we are the pensioners' advocate and the pensioners' ambassador.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I warmly congratulate the Minister on his new appointment. Will he give the House an absolute guarantee that the Government will never again give pensioners a miserly 75p increase in their basic state pension?

Mr. McCartney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks, and I hope that the ride is not as bumpy as some of his hon. Friends would like to make it for me. We will always do the right thing by pensioners, which is why we will introduce a pension credit Bill during this parliamentary Session. We have put other measures in place to ensure that no pensioner in Britain has to live in poverty, as they did under the Tories.

Employment Trends (North-West)

5. Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): If he will make a statement on employment trends in the north-west in the last five years. [444]

The Minister for Work (Mr. Nicholas Brown): In the past five years, employment in the north-west has grown by 187,000, and 73 per cent. of all those of working age are now in employment, compared with 69.2 per cent. five years ago.

Mr. Miller: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new post. May I bring to his attention a success story involving the Cheshire Oaks, Coliseum and Blue Planet complex in my constituency, where partnership between his Department, local government and the private sector has resulted in real jobs for people from some of the areas of highest unemployment in my community? I was pleased to see the Employment Service taking a lead, working

with me to help to prepare young people from those areas for work. I commend that policy to my right hon. Friend as a model for other people to consider.

Mr. Brown: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments. The proactive approach underpins the Government's roll-out of Jobcentre Plus. We intend to work as proactively as we can with people who are out of work in order to get them into work and to enhance their incomes.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I welcome the Minister to his brief, and I hope to shadow him for a little longer at least. The Opposition have been warning for a long time that the Government have failed with the new deal because, for far too many people, it is a revolving door that takes them back on to benefits and into long-term dependency. Now that the TUC has also warned that participants in the new deal are being churned through unwaged new deal options, will the right hon. Gentleman take urgent steps to re-focus the scheme on getting people into real, sustained jobs?

Mr. Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming me to my post, and I note his ambitions for retaining his. I am afraid that I cannot help him with that, as I have little influence over who the new leader of the Conservative party will be. The hon. Gentleman's attitude towards the work of the Employment Service and the proactive approach of the new deal is fundamentally wrong. It is right that the Government should intervene to help those who are out of work into employment, and to work with employers to ensure that the jobs into which we help people can be sustained and provide enduring employment opportunities so that people can be enriched and their standard of living improved, which is what it is all about.

Pension Credit

6. Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): What consultation he will have on the proposed pension credit. [445]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Alistair Darling): More than 400 responses were received to the pension credit consultation paper. As indicated in the Gracious Speech, we intend to introduce legislation in this Session of Parliament.

Mr. Pike: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he recognise that, although most pensioners feel that the Government have done an excellent job in the past four years—compared with the previous 18 years under the Tories—pensioners who have small savings or a second pension sometimes end up worse off than those on the minimum income guarantee? Will he assure those people that that is exactly the problem that the Government intend to address with the pension credit, and that the consultation process will ensure that we get it right before we introduce the credit in 2003?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. There cannot have been a candidate in the recent general election campaign who did not meet a pensioner who had modest savings or a modest occupational pension and who asked, "What's in it for me?" The answer is the pension credit.

We believe that if pensioners have modest savings in the bank, they should not be penalised for that. We also believe that if someone has a small occupational pension, that should be added to rather than resulting in money being taken away.

The pension credit will do two things. First, it will provide a basic guarantee of £100 a week. My hon. Friend may be interested to know that, as a result of the recent take-up campaign, more than 100,000 people have now gained extra money through the minimum income guarantee. Secondly—critically—the pension credit will ensure that people receive something for their savings, and that their years of thrift and sacrifice are rewarded rather than their being penalised under the present system.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): I, too, congratulate the Secretary of State on his new responsibilities.

Can the right hon. Gentleman give us some idea of his estimate of the number of people who are eligible for pension credit? What solution does he propose to the difficulty relating to the interaction of housing benefit, council tax benefit and pension credit?

Mr. Darling: I thank the hon. Lady for her congratulations. Our cup is overflowing today, and we shall make the most of it. I do not suppose that it will last, although we look forward to congratulating one or two Conservative Members in a few months' time, depending on what happens after the leadership campaign.

The pension credit consultation paper made it clear that we expect just over 5 million pensioners to gain from the proposals. That gives some indication of the large number of retired people who have modest savings, and a small occupational pension, and who I believe lost out for years when they ought to have received a reward for their thrift.

As the hon. Lady will know, the Government are determined to change the interaction of housing benefit not just with pension credit but with other aspects of the tax system. We are improving the administration of housing benefit, but we also want to introduce more fundamental structural changes to it. That will take time: the housing benefit system is extremely complex, and the changes that are needed are far-reaching. Pension credit, however, is an extremely important first step, because it means that for the first time it will pay to save. All those who have been in a quandary about whether they should save for their retirement will now know that, if they qualify for the credit, they will be better off for every pound that they save. We are also making changes to the tax system to help pensioners who pay tax.

Pension Funds

7. Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): If he will take steps to require pension funds to facilitate full transferability of accumulated rights to other funds without deductions. [446]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Maria Eagle): Measures are already in place to ensure that people get a fair value for their rights when they transfer from one pension scheme to another.

Dr. Palmer: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her new responsibilities.

People who spend their entire lives in a rut working for one company are often better paid when they retire than those who switch between different employers. In some countries, that is prevented by the requirement on pension funds to pay the same amounts that they would require the employee to pay in if he was joining the company, but in Britain it is possible for someone to lose out successively every time he changes jobs. Does the Minister agree that that is undesirable in principle, and that pension funds should be encouraged to pay the full value?

Maria Eagle: I thank my hon. Friend for his good wishes, and for asking me what is an extremely easy question for me to answer on my first day at the Dispatch Box.

I understand my hon. Friend's point, but it is important to bear in mind the fact that different schemes provide different benefits, and that transfer values between schemes must be fair both to the person who wants to leave and to all the other members of the scheme.

I cannot agree with my hon. Friend that staying in one job for many years means that a person is dull. I hope to stay in my present job for a good many years yet.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The hon. Lady will be aware that some funds suffered more damage than others owing to the £5 billion stealth tax imposed by the Labour Government soon after they took office. What assessment has she made of the final amount by which pensions will be reduced as a result of the stealth tax? Is it true that it could be as much as 23 per cent. in the case of those in their 40s and early 50s—such as myself?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is being a little disingenuous in telling just one side of the story. He is well aware of the fact that we cut corporation tax at the same time as we introduced those other measures.

Pensioner Poverty (Scotland)

8. Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): What measures he proposes to take to alleviate pensioner poverty in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [447]

The Minister for Pensions (Mr. Ian McCartney): Our record speaks volumes. Around 2 million of the poorest pensioner households are now at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997. That is a real-terms rise in living standards of at least 17 per cent.

Sir Robert Smith: I am sure that the Minister will recognise that the poorest pensioners in our society are those who are entitled to the minimum income guarantee but who fail to claim it. What is his current estimate of the number of people who fail to claim the MIG? What target will his Department set for take-up before it will recognise that the MIG is not succeeding for those pensioners and another way will have to be found?

Mr. McCartney: This is a parliamentary first: a Rab C. soundalike answering a Rab C. lookalike. I would take the hon. Gentleman's point more seriously if it were not

for this fact. In 1997, the Liberal Democrats' policy was clear. They offered a minimum income guarantee credit. They have now changed their position. In doing so, they have divided themselves from the Government.

The Government are committed to ensuring that no pensioner in Britain lives in poverty. The uptake of the MIG is considerable. Earlier, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made it clear that, following the latest take-up campaign, over 100,000 pensioners are now receiving £20 a week more. When we think about it, for a small investment, we are taking people out of poverty for their lifetime. Under the old system, people lived in poverty for the whole of their lifetime. The Government are ensuring that every pensioner in Britain will have a minimum income guarantee, and we will improve on that when we introduce the pension credit Bill.

Minimum Income Guarantee

9. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): If he will make a statement on the level of the minimum income guarantee. [450]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Maria Eagle): The level of the MIG was increased significantly in April. Single pensioners are now £15 a week better off in real terms than in 1997 owing to that increase and to other measures.

Paul Goggins: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer and join hon. Members in welcoming her to her new post.

I welcome the impressive increases in the level of the minimum income guarantee that have been initiated by the Government, but a retired pensioner whom I met recently was living on £72 a week, unaware that she was entitled to an extra £20. I am pleased to say that she is now receiving that extra amount, but will my hon. Friend's Department redouble its efforts to identify all pensioners who are eligible and encourage them to make a claim?

Maria Eagle: I am pleased to hear the example that my hon. Friend has related. It is one of many. Of course, we will ensure that as many people as possible who are entitled to the minimum income guarantee claim it. That is the purpose of our take-up campaign. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, over 100,000 people are now an average £20 a week better off as a result of taking up the MIG.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I welcome the Minister to her post. Hard work and perceptiveness on the Public Accounts Committee have been duly rewarded.

What does the Minister intend to do about the 40-page form that one has to fill up to apply for the minimum income guarantee? It includes such gobbledegook questions as:

"Are you involved in a trade dispute?"

Please tell us in part 14 of this form if you want to claim for more than 7 children.

Are you or your partner pregnant?

Are you or your partner on parental leave from your employment?"

Is it not high time that we did away with such gobbledegook, gave some of the poorest pensioners in the land a decent minimum income, abolished the minimum income guarantee and had a proper basic pension instead?

Maria Eagle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words at the beginning of his remarks, which turned into a bit of a rant. I remind him that it was his Government who invented those questions. I assure him that, from October this year, the 40-page form will be down to 10 pages and all those questions will have gone.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend to her new responsibilities. What progress has been made on eliminating that complicated form? Many pensioners are still unable to face the complication of filling in an application form and may be ignorant of the benefits that filling it in would bring. If we could give them the minimum income guarantee without the need for an application form, many more people would benefit.

Maria Eagle: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind remarks. I assure her that we want to minimise the inconvenience and difficulty that people have to go through to receive the minimum income guarantee. We have to ask some questions to determine whether people are eligible, but those will be kept to the minimum. My hon. Friend will no doubt be pleased to hear that those who are trying to claim can receive help on the telephone from those who know how to fill in the forms. We are trying to ensure that those forms are as simple as possible and that there is as much help as possible for those who need to fill them in.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): May I add my congratulations to the hon. Lady on assuming her new position? Does she share my anxiety, and that expressed by Age Concern, about the forecast that the percentage of households eligible for benefits which fail to take them up because they are means-tested will increase to more than 50 per cent under this Government? What assurance can she give the House that that will not happen over the lifetime of this Parliament?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Lady calls it means testing, but I call it ensuring that those who have never had a decent pension have a chance to receive one. There may be a different perspective on the matter, but the fact is that we are ensuring that those who have always had too little money to live on in their old age will now have proper provision. That is to be welcomed.

Income Support

10. Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): If he will make a statement on the application of the habitual residence test in assessing eligibility for income support. [452]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): The habitual residence test ensures that income-related benefits, including income support, are paid to people with reasonably close ties to the United Kingdom and who

intend to settle here. Its underlying principle is that the taxpayer should not have to subsidise people with very tenuous links to this country.

Mr. Luff: The Minister should be aware from my correspondence with his Department that I have specific concerns about the application of the test in the case of my constituent, a British-born pensioner who, after a long absence, returned from former Rhodesia and, subsequently, from South Africa. She has received contradictory advice about how the test will affect her. That is not really surprising, however, as the sheer unknown quality of the test—its general principles are known, but its details are not—leads to highly subjective decision making by local authorities and appeal tribunals. Is it not time to be specific about the test?

Malcolm Wicks: The hon. Gentleman would not expect or desire me to discuss his constituent's case in the House. I understand, however, that she is appealing. We must await the outcome of that, and I shall be happy to discuss the matter with him after that. Factors include the length of stay, future intentions, previous links with the United Kingdom and, in the case of people returning to the United Kingdom, the reasons for their absence. I assure the hon. Gentleman that, in 89 per cent. of cases, people pass the test. People also have a right to appeal, and a proportion of them do pass on appeal. However, I shall discuss his constituent's case at the appropriate moment.

Pensioners (Means-tested Benefits)

11. Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What proportion of pensioners he expects to be on means-tested benefits in 2005. [453]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Alistair Darling): Our objective is to end pensioner poverty and reward thrift, and our policies will continue to do that. By 2005, as a result of our policies, more than half Britain's pensioners will have gained.

Mr. Bercow: I congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment and, indeed, on his new title. Given that the Chancellor of the Exchequer told the 1993 Labour party conference that he wanted to see an end to the means test for our elderly people, but that the proportion of pensioners on means-tested benefits is set to increase from 39 per cent. in 1997 to 57 per cent. in two years, why does the Secretary of State not accept that the Government have broken their promise and that, far from being the sworn enemy of dependency, they are in fact its closest friend?

Mr. Darling: At the last election, and at the 1997 general election, we made a clear promise to do two things. First, we wanted to help all pensioners share in the country's national wealth. Secondly, and critically, we wanted to begin to tackle pensioner poverty which had increased in the previous years. The minimum income guarantee is now benefiting more than 2 million pensioners, 100,000 of whom took it up because of the campaign that we ran earlier this year. We now need to

move forward and ensure that the millions of pensioners who have modest savings or a small occupational pension gain from their thrift.

The position of the hon. Gentleman—and, I understand, the rest of the Conservative party, at least at the moment—is to oppose the pension credit. The Conservatives should turn their minds for one moment not to the election of two weeks ago, but to the election that they will be fighting in four or five years. If they oppose what we are doing, they will have to explain to 5 million pensioners why they are going to cut their incomes as a result of what their policy now appears to be.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Pensioners in my constituency are very pleased at the increase in income that they have received recently, but there is growing concern about the disparity in the value of means-tested benefit as compared with the basic state pension. Last year's Labour party conference was very clear about what should be done about that, passing the resolution to restore the link between pensions and earnings. When will the Government implement Labour party policy?

Mr. Darling: As my hon. Friend will know, I studied that resolution with great interest and it did not say that at all. However, I will give her—at least at this stage of the Parliament—that it was open to a number of interpretations. The position at the general election, which my hon. Friend and I have just finished fighting, was clear. We want to introduce the pension credit because a universal, across-the-board increase would not do anything to address the pensioner inequality that we inherited.

The incomes of the pensioners with the highest incomes went up by some 80 per cent. in the past 20 years. Those pensioners at the other end of the income scale saw their incomes increase by only 30 per cent. To me, it does not seem right in terms of social justice to perpetuate that inequality, so I must disagree with my hon. Friend on that point. The majority of pensioners in this country want two things: first, that pensioner poverty is ended, which is why we introduced the minimum income guarantee, and secondly, that those pensioners who have saved a little bit of money should be rewarded for their thrift. People who live on the basic state pension alone will automatically qualify for the minimum income guarantee. Most people in this country have two pensions: their basic state pension and an occupational one. We want to increase the level of the occupational pension.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): The Secretary of State has acknowledged that people will not receive pension credit if they are in receipt of housing benefit, and said that the Government will look at that. Will he confirm also that those who are in long-term care will not receive the pension credit and, as a result, will be penalised for their thrift? Should not the Government consider the pensions of those in long-term care?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman will know that, in the last Parliament, we introduced measures to benefit people in long-term care with regard to their nursing care. I appreciate that he wants us to do more and, no doubt, the penny on income tax will pay for that, as well as for everything else that the Liberals promised at the last

election. We will propose the exact parameters of the pension credit to the House in due course. I did not say that somebody receiving pension credit would not get housing benefit; the hon. Gentleman misheard me if that is what he thinks I said. However, our overall pensions policy is to make sure that we end pensioner poverty, reward thrift, take more pensioners out of tax and reduce their tax bills and allocate additional resources to help people in long-term care. That is the right thing to do. The difference between our two parties is that we promise what we can deliver because we know we have to deliver. Also, we can actually pay for our policies, something the Liberal Democrats could never do.

Employment Service

12. Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North): If he will further devolve Employment Service employees to locally based offices; and if he will make a statement. [454]

The Minister for Work (Mr. Nicholas Brown): We are keen to encourage innovation and a locally targeted approach to the delivery of Employment Service business, for example through employment zones and action teams for jobs. The area covered by the action team in Nottingham is being greatly expanded and tenders are being invited at present for an area comprising 11 wards. Four additional wards will become part of the action team area from July 1, including Bulwell, East and West in my hon. Friend's constituency.

We are also harnessing new technology to open up access to information about jobs and training. Details of almost half a million jobs are available on the Employment Service website. The Worktrain website combines those details with training opportunities.

Mr. Allen: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new position. In many ways, he will be a victim of the Government's success in getting so many of the unemployed back to work, but there is a law of diminishing returns, in that it is more difficult to get those who are still unemployed back to work. Will my right hon. Friend therefore be ever more creative and inventive in looking at the structure of the Employment Service so that pilot schemes such as the ones in my constituency on the Broxtowe estate and in the Bestwood Park area, where Employment Service personnel are based on estates, are taken further? At present, those schemes are often put together voluntarily, using small pockets of money. Will my right hon. Friend look at the structure of the Employment Service so that there can be a more formal devolution to attack such remaining high pockets of unemployment?

Mr. Brown: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words, and welcome and largely agree with his general approach. It is true that in our country there are now more people in work than ever before. That does not mean that we, as a society, should condemn anyone of working age to the evils and sustained low income of unemployment. It is right that the service should work proactively with those who are currently excluded from the labour market to get them into work—and into fulfilling work—so that their incomes and their lives are enhanced.

Age Discrimination

13. **Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): What plans he has for ending age discrimination in employment. [455]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Maria Eagle): The Government are committed to eradicating age discrimination in employment, and will legislate by 2006. Meanwhile, our code of practice on age diversity is showing results upon which we can build.

Simon Hughes: I know that as a result of last year's European Union directive, 2006 is the date by which we are committed to legislate not simply against age discrimination but against discrimination on the grounds of disability. Can the Government be more ambitious than aiming at the latest possible date allowed for in Europe? Given that their manifesto did not contain a commitment to end age discrimination, will the Government introduce early legislation, or support private Members who do so, to outlaw age discrimination and allow people to go on working without regard to age if they are competent to do so?

Maria Eagle: I hope that the hon. Gentleman heard me say that we will be introducing legislation. He knows as well as I do that it is important to take employers with us. There has to be a balanced approach in making sure that rights are introduced and that those who have to implement them and abide by them know about them and are on board. That is what we will do. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will welcome that, although he seems a bit churlish.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): Without wishing to be churlish, and as someone who tried to introduce a private Member's Bill on this subject in 1996, may I ask why, if it is right to outlaw race, gender and disability discrimination, the same should not apply to age discrimination? Although I recognise that such a law will come into being at some point, would it not be best for the many people who find themselves discriminated against on the grounds of age, not in their late 50s or early 60s but in their early 40s, to introduce a law earlier than the date mentioned by my hon. Friend?

Maria Eagle: I have every sympathy with my hon. Friend's position, and know of his interest in this respect. We have not been sitting doing nothing—our code of practice on age diversity has started to show results. For example, it is now much less usual to see employment advertisements using age as a criterion, which is a welcome advance. As I said in answer to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes), we need to take a balanced approach and ensure that we take everybody with us, and that is what we are doing.

Pensioners (Means-tested Benefits)

14. **Mr. John Randall** (Uxbridge): If he will make a statement on means testing among pensioners. [456]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Alistair Darling): The benefits system has always included universal means-tested and non-contributory elements. In 1979, the proportion of expenditure on means-tested benefits was 17 per cent, by 1997 it was 35 per cent., but it is estimated that this year it will be about 30 per cent.

Mr. Randall: Has the Secretary of State ever been in favour of ending means testing for elderly people?

Mr. Darling: I believe that it is right, if the policy is to help people who need it most, to identify pensioners whose incomes are low. The alternative is to give people a universal, across-the-board increase. That is not currently the policy of any of the three major parties in this country and was certainly not their policy at the election. What is intolerable in this country is the situation that we inherited, in which 2 million pensioners were living in poverty. Their incomes were so low that they were automatically eligible for income support. We want to increase the amount that they get. If the hon. Gentleman is telling me that the Conservative party is against means testing, it must follow that he is now in favour of a universal pension.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I must tell the Secretary of State that he should not lapse into speaking about the policies of parties other than his own.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): Does it annoy my right hon. Friend as much as it annoys me to hear Opposition Members bleating on about means testing? Is not it the truth that, whatever one's views about the earnings link, this Labour Government have done more for pensioners in the past four years than the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) and his party would have done if they had been in power for a further 18 years?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. It is necessary to take steps to end pensioner poverty. First, that involves finding out about pensioners' incomes so that they can be increased. Secondly, we must ensure that we have a policy that rewards thrift—something that did not previously happen in the social security system. Thirdly, we must help all pensioners not only through the universal basic state pension increase, but with other measures, such as removal from tax eligibility. It is worth bearing in mind that, from next year, almost three quarters of pensioners will either pay no tax or will pay it only at the 10p starting rate.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): May I give the Secretary of State another chance to answer a question that he was asked not only just now, but earlier, by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow)? Does he still share the objectives set out by the Chancellor in 1993 to reduce or end means testing?

Mr. Darling: I was explaining my answer, but was shown the red card, so I shall be careful. The Government's policy is clear. We believe that we must end pensioner poverty. It is therefore necessary to identify pensioner incomes that are so low that they should be increased. We must also ensure that people who have

modest savings or a modest occupational pension receive additional help through the pension credit. Both those measures involve ascertaining how much pensioners have. If we do not do that, there is a choice of alternatives. We can give no help at all—I think that that must be the hon. Gentleman's policy—or go back to universal, across-the-board increases, which would not address the pensioner inequality that we inherited and which we are determined to do something about.

Disability Rights Taskforce

16. Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): What measures he is proposing to take to implement the programme outlined in the Government's response to the final report of the disability rights taskforce. [458]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Maria Eagle): Our consultation document "Towards Inclusion" sets out the wide-ranging action that the Government are already taking to improve civil rights for disabled people in all areas of life. That includes the recent introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001. We will end the exemption of small employers from the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in 2004 and make the other improvements to the DDA when parliamentary time allows.

Mr. Levitt: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. She follows in the tradition of Ministers with responsibility for disability rights in this Government who have a strong record of delivery. I am sure that the document to which she referred will be the basis for continuing that tradition. Will she evangelise on the subject of the employers' threshold, which she mentioned? The threshold was a major demand of the disability movement for a number of years and is one of many aspects of the document "Towards Inclusion" that deserve taking forward and preaching from the highest rooftops so that not only disabled people but employers know what we are promising.

Maria Eagle: I have been asked to do many things in my life, but evangelise is not one of them. None the less, I shall undertake to be extremely positive, because it is important to take everybody with us as we approach 2004, including small firms and business in general, to ensure that the measure can be properly implemented. One thing is for sure: there is no point in having rights if they cannot be enforced or obligations if they cannot be met.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): I, too, welcome the Under-Secretary to her post. Does she feel that, important as disability rights are—we are not arguing about that—the greatest wish of up to 750,000 disabled people today is for a viable job that they can manage to discharge? In that connection, will she undertake to examine the much better record of private sector insurers in providing rehabilitation in a package alongside disability benefits and so getting people quickly into or back to employment?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman identifies an important issue that relates to getting people who have just become disabled back into work or to keeping them

in their job. That is an important consideration which I undertake to look closely at as I find my way around my new responsibilities.

Annuities

19. Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): If he will make a statement on the compulsory purchase of annuities. [461]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Alistair Darling): The Government have made it clear that it is important that pension funds that are built up with the support of tax relief are used for their intended purpose. The Government welcome the wider diversity and choice now available in the annuity market and remain open to workable and affordable alternatives.

Mr. Flight: Will the Government respond to the comments made by Dr. Oonagh McDonald to the effect that it is not the case that the recommendations of the McDonald report would involve a loss of tax revenue, as the Government have alleged? If there is not a fiscal case for opposing the end of the obligation to buy annuities, what are the Government's objections?

Mr. Darling: As the hon. Gentleman knows, Dr. McDonald recommended a retirement plan that would provide an income over a 20-year period. The question is what happens after that. We want to avoid a situation in which people do not have a fund with which to provide their pension during their retirement, which can happen if there is early draw-down or a 20-year retirement plan, as proposed by Dr. McDonald. We also want to avoid doing anything that would result in a further reduction in annuity rates, which would, of course, be detrimental for all pensioners. However, we remain open to workable proposals that are seen to improve matters. Although we will respond to Dr. McDonald's proposals, I am not sure that we are quite ready to do so.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Does the Secretary of State agree that a great many pensioners have been caused much distress by the collapse in annuity values over the past few years? Does he also agree that the Government's objectives could be perfectly well achieved if the element of compulsion were confined to the level of the income guarantee?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman is right; annuity rates have come down. There are two principal reasons for that: first, inflation is low, which benefits many pensioner incomes, and, secondly, increased life expectancy, which is a major determinant of the annuity rate. Those are good things, but annuity rates have fallen. One measure will help. He will be aware that in, I think, 1999, a study into pension funds showed that more than one third of the fund was eaten up by charges and fees. The stakeholder pension that we introduced caps charges at 1 per cent., the effect of which has been felt across the industry, and will result in more of the pension fund being available for retirement. As for compulsion, I believe that the hon. Gentleman knows that that already exists in the pension system.

Pension Credit (South-West)

20. **Linda Gilroy** (Plymouth, Sutton): What response he has had to the consultation on the pension credit from people and organisations in the south-west of England. [462]

The Minister for Pensions (Mr. Ian McCartney): We received more than 400 responses, including from the west country, to the consultation exercise. The credit delivered from 2003 will tackle pensioner poverty, first by ensuring that no pensioner lives on less than £100 a week and no pensioner couple lives on less than £154 a week. We are rewarding, not penalising, pensioners for having worked and saved so that they can provide for themselves by giving incomes of up to £135 a week to single pensioners and £200 a week to couples. Secondly, we have reformed the capital limits and the unrealistic rates of return that go with them, abolished the weekly means test and modernised the way in which we deliver pensions by simplifying the rules and significantly reducing from the outset the complex information that is available. Over time, we will reduce the intrusion and hassle experienced by pensioners.

Linda Gilroy: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply and welcome him to his new responsibilities. I also welcome the proposal in the Queen's Speech to introduce the pension credit through legislation this Session. May I urge him to ensure, as soon as he can, that straightforward

information is made available in good time to the many thousands of people in my constituency who could benefit from that new pension credit?

Mr. McCartney: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind remarks and give an absolute guarantee we will keep in regular contact with all hon. Members and the pensioners who will benefit from the pension credit so that they receive information on their rights at appropriate times. The purpose of creating the new pension service—a national service delivered locally—is to improve dramatically across the United Kingdom pensioners' access to information and to income.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Does the Minister agree with Mr. Mervyn Kohler, the director general of Help the Aged, who thinks that the pension credit

"is far too complex and over-elaborate"?

Mr. McCartney: The gentleman that the hon. Gentleman mentions may have been misinterpreted because, in principle, his organisation welcomes the purpose of the pension credit, which, as I have said, is intended to reduce complexity, intrusion and hassle and to ensure that people have early access to it. When pensioners see the proposals, they will find that the Government have been true to their word in introducing a credit that gives pensioners easy, transparent and quick access to additional forms of income.

Disturbances, Burnley

3.33 pm

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley) (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on what action his Department is going to take following the riots in Burnley over the weekend.

The Minister for Police, Courts and Drugs (Mr. John Denham): As the House is aware, outbreaks of disorder took place in Burnley on the evening of Saturday 23 June and, more seriously, yesterday evening, 24 June. I have received an urgent report from Lancashire constabulary, from which at least the outlines of what occurred are clear.

A number of apparently spontaneous incidents occurred in the early morning of Saturday 23 June. They included a fight between two groups of Asian youths outside a local night club, one of which was local to the area and the other from west Yorkshire. Two of the local youths were stabbed, and two people have been arrested.

In the second incident, police were called to the scene of a quarrel between a group of Asian people and a white group, following complaints that the white group was holding a noisy party. In the disturbance that followed, nine vehicles, which belonged to Asian and white families, were damaged by the white youths. At the same time, an off-duty Asian taxi driver was attacked by a group of white men and suffered a fractured cheek bone. Two white males were arrested.

During Saturday evening, residents of the Stoneyholme district reported gatherings of young Asian men near Abel street. Police officers were deployed to the area and began to speak to the youths, but missiles were soon thrown at the police. Damage was caused to the Duke of York public house on Colne road and what are described as minor altercations took place between local Asian and white youths. For the next two hours, there were sporadic incidents of stone throwing at passing vehicles—police cars and private cars—but the police inform me that no large-scale disorder took place. The streets were again quiet by 1 am.

On the next day, there were a number of minor incidents, to which the police responded, between 5 am and 7 pm. Disorder recurred around 7.30 pm, when, without warning, about 70 white males left a public house and headed for the Stoneyholme area to challenge Asian youths. Serious disorder broke out. Several missiles were thrown at the police and, during the disorder, vehicles were set on fire, together with the public house and shop premises. At the height of the disorder, petrol bombs were thrown at the police. During that period, the police attempted to prevent confrontations between white and Asian youths. Following police intervention, the crowds had dispersed by 1 am.

I understand from the police that 11 people, eight of whom are white, have so far been arrested for actions arising from the weekend's events. The offences include criminal damage, wounding and public order offences. I am pleased to say that there have been no reports of injuries to the police.

I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing disgust at the criminal violence that took place on the streets of Burnley over the weekend and at the

mindless acts of provocation that preceded it. The police strategy has been to protect all sections of the community, to minimise damage to property and to investigate criminal activity.

I welcome the statement made by my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike), reported in the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph*, in which he appealed for calm and urged white and Asian youths to stay off the streets. I also welcome similarly positive statements by the Bishop of Blackburn, the Right Reverend Alan Chesters, and Moulana Ahmed Sidat, chairman of the Lancashire Council of Mosques.

The weekend's events will have been deeply disturbing to everyone living in Burnley. From the information that I have received so far, it appears that a series of apparently unrelated individual incidents sparked the trouble. There can be no excuse for violence or lawbreaking from any section of the community. The whole House will condemn the activities of racist organisations and those who are racially motivated, but my hon. Friend will want to look at how the tensions and problems that were manifest this weekend can be overcome.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), are, of course, seeking advice from our race advisers and the Commission for Racial Equality on any common elements in the disturbances of recent weeks. I shall look in particular at the policing and law and order elements of the events in Burnley.

As at Oldham, the primary job of tackling the underlying problems that give rise to divisions and disturbance must be done at a local level. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is today in Oldham talking to local people about the way forward there.

I have asked for reports from the police, the Government office for the north west and the local authority on events in Burnley and the issues that might lie behind them. I understand that there is a long tradition of good race relations in Burnley, and I hope that, with the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley, those who want to build on that tradition will identify what needs to be done over the weeks and months ahead.

Mr. Pike: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Will he echo my comments that it is vital that people stay at home tonight and do not go out to create more disturbance? The only way to resolve the problems is to sit around the table and talk. Is not it therefore important that we give our full support to this afternoon's discussions between the police, the council and members of the local community in Burnley, with a view to resolving those problems?

Is not it also important to recognise that, although, regrettably, the racist and extremist British National party received more than 11 per cent. of the vote in Burnley on 7 June, not all those who voted for it are necessarily racist? Many were misled by its comments during the election campaign. Should we not address what is at the core of the disturbances? We should consider the problems of empty houses and poverty in many parts of Burnley, and attack those problems jointly.

Does my right hon. Friend recognise that the money available to a small district council such as Burnley—it is not a unitary authority—is minimal? Although Burnley

[Mr. Pike]

has always fully supported the fact that most of the money made available is no longer core funding but is targeted at particular problems, it faces difficulty in moving funding around in order to meet specific problems that are perceived locally as priorities. Having said that, the main thing is that we want an end to the disturbances. I am sure that everybody in the House condemns all the acts of violence and hooliganism over the weekend.

Mr. Denham: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments. He is right to urge everybody to put the events of the weekend behind them and to sit down and talk about the way forward. We of course welcome and fully support the discussions to which he referred.

My hon. Friend mentioned the issues facing district councils. Elected local representatives, including those on the council and, of course, leaders of local community organisations, have an important role to play not only financially but in uniting the community and tackling the problems that obviously exist. Burnley has received significant investment through the regeneration programme in particular, but it is important that local people identify what else needs to be done in order to find a way forward.

With regard to racist organisations, I join my hon. Friend in condemning those who seek to exploit underlying problems with simplistic solutions to complex and real issues that need to be thrashed out by people talking and working together.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): I welcome the Minister of State to his new responsibilities. As this occasion illustrates, he is taking on responsibility for some very difficult and complex problems affecting our country. We on the Opposition Benches wish him well in the discharge of those new duties.

I join the Minister of State and the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) in condemning the violence on the streets of Burnley and in their calls for people in the town, from whatever community, to exercise self-discipline and restraint and to seek to tackle the problems through peaceful and democratic discussion rather than street violence.

I appreciate that there might be legal constraints on what the Minister can say, but is he able to tell the House whether there is any evidence of the involvement of members of the British National party or other far-right groups in provoking the incidents in Burnley? Does he agree that we in this country have laws that make incitement to racial hatred a criminal offence and that, if the evidence exists, they should be rigorously enforced and exemplary sentences given?

I agree that the solutions to Burnley's problems and to the underlying tensions to which the hon. Member for Burnley referred have to be found primarily through local action rather than central Government action, but we should reject the idea, advanced in some quarters, that the answer is to accept that there should be no-go areas of the town for either white or Asian people. I hope that all Members of Parliament, whatever their politics, agree that we should strive to ensure that every citizen of Burnley—or of any other town or city in this country—feels that he or she enjoys the rights and responsibilities of being British citizens, and that no one has to feel afraid to walk down any street or through any district in their home town.

Will the Minister consider, as part of his reflections on the events of the weekend, some of the reports that de facto segregation of Asian and white neighbourhoods in Burnley has helped some of the problems to emerge, with people from different communities not mixing because they do not live in the same neighbourhoods?

May I ask the Minister—in what I assure him is a non-partisan spirit—whether the Government will, as part of their response to events in Burnley and elsewhere, reconsider the priority that central Government as a whole give to neighbourhood street policing in our towns and cities? The concept has become somewhat unfashionable in recent years, but I believe that it is when police officers have become familiar faces to the people of the neighbourhoods that they regularly patrol that they win the trust of people from all communities in that neighbourhood and can, as a result, be more effective police officers.

Mr. Denham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his opening remarks and welcome his condemnation of this weekend's violence.

The hon. Gentleman asks whether I have any evidence of involvement by particular organised groups and racist groups in the events of the weekend. The honest answer, as I stand here this afternoon, is that I have received no such indication at this stage, but he will understand that these are early days in terms of receiving full reports. I think that the whole House would draw the distinction between involvement of particular groups and actions that occur because particular groups have been involved in exploiting community issues, but the hon. Gentleman is right to say that there are strong legal powers to deal with incitement to racial hatred and other race crimes.

I agree that no one in a free society wants to compromise that by saying that there should be places where certain people in that free society cannot go. There cannot be no-go areas as either an outcome or an instrument of policy. If there are issues in Burnley or elsewhere relating to where local communities live, those are precisely the sorts of issues that must be addressed in the short, medium and long term through the discussions that should take place at local level.

We recognise that local policing—neighbourhood policing—has an important role to play in many different ways in tackling the fear of crime and building up understanding with local communities, as do the efforts that we have made and will continue to make to ensure that, in the coming years, we in this country have a police service that is fully representative of all the communities it serves.

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I, too, welcome the Minister to his important responsibilities as the Minister for Police, Courts and Drugs. I join colleagues on both sides of the House in condemning violence as a solution to any community tension or problem and in thanking both the local authority and police for their leadership and work, and the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) for his community leadership over many years.

In the same vein as the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), may I put three issues to the Minister? First, will he take time to look at the delivery of three services—police services, housing services and the youth

service—in Burnley, Oldham and other places where there has been community tension? Will he make sure that those services are sufficient, so that the police respond quickly enough, the housing service has adequate housing and the youth service has adequate resources, and that they are provided in a non-discriminatory way that can be seen objectively to treat equally people from all community groups?

Secondly, although there may not be any immediate evidence of a link between right-wing political activity and the events of this weekend, I have no doubt—from my own constituency experience among others—that the more right-wing activity there is, the more tension rises. I am happy to collaborate on the following matter, and I am sure that my colleagues in other parties are as well: will the Minister investigate whether we are prosecuting adequately the use of language and written literature that appears to incite racial hatred, but which is often not followed up by police or prosecution service activity? We frequently seem to get on to difficult ground when we ban marches, but we do not often take action against individuals, spoken words and printed literature.

Thirdly, so that we do not have a summer of events in one city or town followed by statements, questions and so on, may I constructively suggest that the Minister and the Home Secretary convene a group from at least the three parties in England to try to prevent problems before they arise and to learn the wisdom of community management from mixed-race multicultural communities? There are tensions in many places, but there are many places where the best experience can minimise them and take the community forward. It may be better to anticipate future tensions and difficulties, rather than always to react to them.

Mr. Denham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He asked about the delivery of key public services in Burnley and elsewhere, and I am sure that he will recognise the significance of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, which not only outlaws discrimination in all public authority functions not covered by the Race Relations Act 1976 but places a general duty on listed public authorities to promote racial equality, which is an important change of emphasis. The hon. Gentleman is therefore right that the Government as a whole will look at the way in which many different public services will now fulfil their responsibilities under the 2000 Act.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned activity by racist parties. As I acknowledged earlier, there can be a direct relationship between activities in communities that have been targeted by racist organisations and the level of racial violence or disturbance that takes place, and we must aim to counter that. I will look at the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that activity that falls foul of the law is not being prosecuted, and I am happy to receive from him examples of material or events that give rise to concern. We now clearly have powerful laws on the statute book to tackle racist activity, and we expect them to be used effectively and well.

As for avoiding future events, when we look at areas where there have been problems we often conclude, although I do not want to pre-judge anything that may have happened in Burnley this weekend, that there are common underlying factors and issues specific to that locality. Discussions about community building that will

now inevitably take place in Burnley, as they have done in Oldham, will also have to take place in many different parts of the country so that people anticipate problems instead of waiting to find out that they have them.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Does my right hon. Friend accept that many people are deeply concerned about events first in Oldham and now in Burnley? There is no excuse for violent disorder, and the House supports the police in the action that they have had to take. There are complex underlying issues on which an outsider would not dream of commenting, but clearly race is a factor. We do not want to see what happened in Burnley replicated throughout the summer. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that as well as considering the short-term public order issue, he will take up the point made by the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) from the Opposition Front Bench that we have the necessary law? There is no doubt that the BNP's activity has raised the temperature in certain areas, and that if the law exists it should be used. All the factors should be considered. No community should think that it does not have a voice and that it is not being listened to.

Mr. Denham: I agree very much that no community should feel that it does not have a voice or that it is not listened to. I agree also that the laws that the House has enacted to deal with racist crimes and statements made or activities undertaken by racist organisations should be used. That is why the House passed the measures in the first place. It is true that the issues are complex in particular communities. We must do what we can, but it is important that others consider the problems at local level and try to identify the issues that are specific to local areas.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): May I join in welcoming the right hon. Gentleman to his new position? Does he agree that the events are worrying given, as he rightly said, the generally good state of race relations in Burnley? Does he agree also that the events of last night are therefore untypical?

Will the right hon. Gentleman therefore congratulate the police on the vigorous and robust way in which they rightly stepped in to try to control the situation? Will he ensure that in those areas where he and others remain anxious about tensions, especially in inner cities, his suggestion and that of the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) that people in such areas should be called together before there is any trouble by the police and other community leaders, to try to find a way through and to ensure that a peaceful regime is maintained, is a sensible and proactive way in which to proceed?

Mr. Denham: That was a helpful comment. I understand that the events of the weekend were untypical of the recent history of Burnley. People in other areas will want to ensure that all necessary discussions take place. There must not be a dialogue of the deaf or a failure to talk before problems emerge.

I am happy to repeat my thanks to the police for the way in which they conducted events over the weekend. Effective policing of disturbances such as those that took place over the weekend and good policing all year round

[Mr. Denham]

are essential. At the end of the day, however, these are not problems that can be resolved by policing. They involve relations between communities and underlying economic and social problems within communities, and they must be tackled at that level. The police will always play their professional role, as they did this weekend in Burnley, but we must tackle the root causes that give rise to disturbances.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): The House will be united in deploring racial violence, but does the Minister agree that there has been a substantial decline in good race relations? We are aware of that in Southend, where I live and where there were outbreaks at the weekend similar to those in Burnley.

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that many members of the public think that the decline could be related to what they regard as a lack of effective control and operation of asylum seekers? Does he consider that there could be a substantial improvement in good race relations if the Government would make it a priority to ensure that speedier decisions were taken on asylum applications?

Mr. Denham: That was a very regrettable and unfortunate intervention, and I think that it was wrong. I do not know Burnley well, but I imagine that the majority of those involved in Burnley, from whatever community they came, were born in Burnley and are second or third generation residents in this country. I do not know what connection that would have with the issue of asylum.

Some politicians have sought to exploit the issue of asylum in a way that has had an unfortunate effect on wider race relations. In general, I do not agree that there has been a marked deterioration in race relations. I do not believe that there is evidence of that. There are still major problems and issues to be tackled, but we have made progress over the past 20 years. We have not gone backwards.

Point of Order

3.54 pm

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you give some guidance on protocol in the House? You may have noticed that several new Members of Parliament have tabled oral questions for the next few days. Indeed, a new hon. Member asked a question at Question Time today. I understood that, until an hon. Member had made a maiden speech, it was not proper to ask an oral question or participate in proceedings apart from tabling written questions. Does the protocol continue to exist, or is it in abeyance?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I shall try to help the hon. Gentleman and the House. No absolute rule states that an hon. Member may not participate until he or she has made his or her maiden speech, but it is the custom of the House that the maiden speech precedes any other activity in the Chamber. It is often good advice to new Members that they test the nature of the pitch before deciding to play a longer innings, but the new hon. Member who asked a supplementary question this afternoon had already made his maiden speech.

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[FOURTH DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [20 June].

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:
Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—
[Mr. Sheerman.]

Question again proposed.

The Economy, Trade and Industry

3.56 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The Queen's Speech and the detailed announcements that I shall make today build on the economic foundation of stability that, since 1997, has been our priority, which we shall never take for granted. The enterprise Bill proposed in the Queen's Speech will advance our economic objective to match, over the next 10 years, the higher productivity and prosperity of our major competitors. The welfare reform Bill will advance our objective to build on the 1 million jobs that have been created since 1997, to achieve full employment in this decade and to make work pay.

Today, I shall give details of the tax credit Bill. That measure and the pension credit Bill will advance our objective of ensuring that every child in our country has the best possible start in life and that not one is left behind, and that every pensioner can enjoy retirement in dignity.

One central, defining idea underlies the measures and the accompanying public service reform legislation. It has made the events of the past month more than simply a competition between parties and a real contest of ideas. For us and, I believe, the British people, opportunity for all, and our actions to secure it, is the key not only to enterprise and a good economy but to decent public services and a good society. We want to ensure opportunity for not only the few but everyone in our country.

The precondition for the reform programme in the Queen's Speech is that, even when we are tested by exchange rate pressures, oil price movements and the American slow-down, we strengthen, not relax, the monetary and fiscal disciplines and rules that have given this country the lowest inflation in Europe, the lowest unemployment for 25 years and the lowest mortgage and long-term interest rates for more than 30 years.

The Government will support the Bank of England and maintain our anti-inflation discipline. We shall hold to a fiscal regime that achieves a current budget balance. That has meant that, this year, debt is forecast to fall from the 44 per cent. that we inherited to 30 per cent. of gross domestic product. In future, any party that is serious about political office will need not only to have an inflation target and fiscal rules, but to set and follow clear, tough,

monetary and fiscal objectives and disciplines if it is to convince the people that it is doing everything to avoid the old, familiar boom and boost.

There is an even greater economic challenge for Britain. It is to deliver this decade what has eluded us for too long: faster productivity rises than our main industrial competitors. At any point in the past 20 years, it was open to a Government to make not only the Bank of England independent, but our competition authorities independent and free of political influence, to use the criminal law to outlaw cartels, to reform insolvency laws and remove Crown preference, thus reducing the cost of business failure, to introduce an enterprise management incentive scheme for growing high-growth firms and to cut capital gains tax, as we have done, from 40 per cent. to 10 per cent. for transactions in business assets that are held for two years.

I am pleased, therefore, that it is a Labour enterprise Bill, led by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, and Labour Budgets that are pushing forward the agenda for prosperity. Furthermore, our review of planning procedures and our plans for improved workplace skills to provide better links between businesses and schools, and for a research and development tax credit giving special help to manufacturers will advance that agenda for higher productivity.

These announcements are just the start. Building on the cut in small business taxation, an extension of the new 10p small company rate, a new flat rate VAT scheme and a single system of accounts for small businesses, and building on the 170,000 new businesses that we have created since 1997, we shall publish in the next few weeks our proposals, area by area, for stamp duty exemptions so that we can have business development in our high-unemployment communities.

Charities and businesses will also join the Government in a £40 million community development venture capital fund to bring work to high-unemployment areas, and regional development agencies in every part of the country will soon publish their prospectuses for what will eventually amount to a £1 billion fund for the UK, to bring new businesses and jobs to every region.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: I shall give way in a moment.

I hope that the whole House now agrees not only that regional development agencies are an essential element for achieving balanced regional growth, but that regional policy itself, equipping people and areas to cope with change, will have to be enhanced rather than swept away if we are to achieve high levels of growth in employment in every region of the country. [Interruption.] I see that some Members of the Conservative party have learned nothing from the past few weeks.

Michael Fabricant: The Chancellor will be aware that, over the past four years, the UK's position in the world competition league has dropped from ninth to 19th place. He will also be aware that Motorola, for example, has closed its plant in Scotland while keeping open its plant in Germany. He has just announced a series of new

[Michael Fabricant]

initiatives. Does he believe that in the next four years we can get back to ninth place, where we were when he started?

Mr. Brown: Not only are there 1 million more people in jobs and 170,000 new small businesses, but productivity has been rising this year, last year and the year before and it continues to rise. The question that Conservative Members should address with us is how we can do better. I would like to hear from the hon. Gentleman whether he welcomes our new competition policy proposals, our cut in capital gains tax and other measures that we are introducing?

Michael Fabricant rose—

Mr. Brown: Oh, he does. I give way to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable).

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I welcome the Chancellor's personal interest in encouraging a tougher line against anti-competitive practices, but why has his Department bottled out of its commitment to an early introduction of a regulator—Paycom—to curb the substantial excess profits that the banks earn from their control over the clearing system?

Mr. Brown: We have not bottled out of anything. It was us who set up the Cruickshank review, published its proposals and put the performance of banks in relation to small businesses to the competition authorities. We are now waiting for their response on this matter. I thought that the hon. Gentleman would be standing up to congratulate us on taking action to deal with those abuses, as they will certainly have to be dealt with if we are to have the most competitive economy in the future. The Liberal party should be congratulating us, rather than criticising us for what we have done.

Our measures for opening up enterprise to all are complemented by our measures for opening up employment opportunity to all. Today in Britain, 28.1 million people are in work. That is more than at any time in our history. Long-term unemployment, which stood at 326,000 in the spring of 1997, is now below 100,000—the lowest for 20 years. Youth unemployment, which was once as high as 500,000, is now down to 41,000—the lowest since 1975. The shadow Chancellor might wish to note that in the past four years in his constituency, youth unemployment fell by 79 per cent. and long-term unemployment by 81 per cent. as a result of the new deal.

Because there is more to do, we shall never be complacent. For too long, Britain's communities—such as the one that I represent—were ravaged by long-term unemployment, youth unemployment, the fear of unemployment and the poverty and insecurity caused by unemployment. The first stage of the new deal tackled unemployment among young people. Now we shall tackle unemployment among all four of the worst hit groups: the long-term and young out of work, lone parents and disabled people, all of whom have been denied their right to work for too long.

From now on, no one will be excluded from the opportunities of the new deal, so this Session's welfare reform Bill will extend opportunities and responsibilities

not just to all long-term unemployed, but to the partners of the unemployed, even when they are not heads of household. In that new phase, we shall offer special coaching help for others who are hard to employ, and we shall not hesitate to take additional measures, including greater sanctions, where they are needed to get people back into work and achieve full employment.

If only one young person had benefited from the new deal, it would have been justified, but, already, almost 300,000 young people have found work. I hope that there can now be all-party agreement that the Government were right to impose the £5 billion windfall tax, which is still helping to pay for our welfare-to-work programme, and are right about the principle of our approach. An active labour market policy is essential to equip people for the future, and we recognise that, in the modern economy, economic efficiency is bought not at the cost of social justice, but, indeed, by promoting social justice.

We also believe that decent minimum standards advance not only social justice but economic efficiency. Thus, in October the minimum wage, on which we legislated in the previous Parliament, will rise to £4.10 and, next year, to £4.20. That will mean a £17.50 a week rise. Also, last week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced to 140,000 young people that their minimum rate will rise to £3.20, then £3.50 and then £3.60 in 2002.

Following those changes, I can also announce that, in October, the guaranteed minimum income under the working families tax credit for full-time working families with children will be raised to £225 a week. That represents an £11,000 a year guaranteed income for working families with children, which means a negative tax rate of minus 200 per cent. as a result of our new proposals. Again, I hope that all parties will affirm that a working families tax credit, which Ronald Reagan himself said was the best anti-poverty and pro-family policy in America and which has been raised most generously by George Bush in the past few months, is also good for Britain's social justice and Britain's economic success.

The new tax credit Bill, with its targeted tax cuts for work, extends the principle of the working families tax credit to working households without children. Thus, for couples, the employment credit that we are introducing will guarantee for adults working full-time a minimum weekly income of £170, or £8,800 a year. That could not have begun to happen without a second-term Labour Government.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Labour Members are delighted and relieved to know that aspects of my right hon. Friend's active labour market policies have the endorsement of Ronald Reagan, but he will be aware that statistics published towards the end of the last Parliament appear to show that the gap between rich and poor had widened under the previous Administration. Can he give the House an undertaking that, by the end of this Parliament, the gap between rich and poor will begin to narrow?

Mr. Brown: Of course, it is as a result of the working families tax credit, the minimum income guarantee for pensioners, raising child benefit and the children's tax credit that low-income families are finding that their income position is being raised. If my hon. Friend talks to

people in her—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question."] I am answering the question. If she talks to her constituents, she will find that many are £50 a week better off as a result of the changes that we are making. Precisely for that reason, we are narrowing the gap between rich and poor in this country.

I hope that my hon. Friend will take this from me: in the previous Parliament, Conservative Members were unable to support a policy that had the support of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, which was an amazing commentary on the Conservative party between 1997 and 2001.

Michael Fabricant: Do not worry; I could not get an answer either.

Mr. Brown: Conservative Members got an answer; it is called the election result.

In a modern economy, all young people should have the chance to develop their potential to the full, and a party that promises opportunity for all should be prepared to allocate the necessary public spending resources to ensure that every child has the best possible start in life.

Child poverty is a scar on the soul of our country. It was a matter of shame for Britain that, when we came to power in 1997, one child in every three was born poor. Having taken 1 million children out of poverty in our first term—if the Tory party had been in power, they would have remained condemned to poverty—our ambition in what I believe is the best anti-deprivation policy and the best anti-delinquency and anti-crime policy, is to take the next 1 million children out of poverty. Alongside our commitment to public services, that will be a central priority for next year's Budget and spending review. I am pleased to tell the House that in the Queen's Speech we were able to move closer to achieving that ambition.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: I am happy to give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who is one of the few people who is not standing in his party's leadership election.

Mr. Redwood: The Queen's Speech said that the Government would ratify the Nice treaty. Now that the Irish people have voted no in a referendum, does the Chancellor think that no should mean no and that is the end of it, or that the Irish people should be told that they need to think again, vote again and answer yes? We would like to know how strongly he supports referendums.

Mr. Brown: Trust the right hon. Gentleman—when we are talking about child poverty, he starts talking about the Nice treaty. The Irish Prime Minister has already answered his point. The Irish people will be asked to support the Nice treaty. This is a matter for them to resolve as they choose, and they will do so in the next few months. The right hon. Gentleman's intervention on Europe carries some menace for whoever takes over the leadership of the Conservative party.

Mr. Redwood: Answer the question.

Mr. Brown: I have answered the right hon. Gentleman's point. The Irish people will resolve this

matter, as their Prime Minister has said. The menace is that the right hon. Gentleman remains committed, under all circumstances, never to consider joining a monetary union and wants to renegotiate Britain's membership of the European Union. He would set this country back many years. That is another sign that the Conservative party, far from having a debate based on candour and frankness with people being prepared to talk fairly among themselves, is about to enter into a big conflict on Europe.

Since 1997, we have raised child benefit by 40 per cent. in cash terms. We have introduced the new children's tax credit, which for 5 million families is a family tax cut worth up to £520 a year. We have reduced the direct tax burden for a single-earner family on average earnings from 21 per cent. to 18 per cent., which is the lowest level for 30 years. In this Parliament, we shall introduce a tax credit Bill that will provide for a new, seamless system of support for children.

From the foundation of a universal child benefit for all, which is £15.50 for the first child, the children's tax credit—which is the family tax cut—raises the income of 5 million families by £25.50 or up to the weekly payment for children, which is now £51.50, with most going to those who need help most. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is today announcing the transfer of the Child Benefit Centre to the Inland Revenue, so that universal child benefit and the new integrated child credit will be delivered by a single agency with a single aim, which will be to ensure that every child and family have the financial support that they need.

With the under-one credit set at £1,000 and maternity pay at £100 a week guaranteed for six months, more support is now available. Soon there will also be 1.6 million child care places for families when they need it most: when their children are youngest.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I welcome how much the Government have done in the past four years to improve family life, but could I direct my right hon. Friend to a report by the Daycare Trust, published today, called "Children's Centres", which says that despite the advances being made, and despite the money that has been put in the pockets of working families, there is still a shortage of day care places, the cost of which is still prohibitive? I recommend that my right hon. Friend reads the report and considers whether there are better ways of avoiding the 45 funding streams that child care providers currently have to use to get money to establish child care services.

Mr. Brown: That is an important point. We have increased the working families tax credit payment for child care. We are also delivering our proposals, with money, to develop the 1.6 million child care places. I agree with my hon. Friend that more needs to be done more quickly. The difference between us and the Conservative party is that we are committed to a national child care strategy for the first time in this country, and we are committed to funding it properly. It is not clear whether that is the Conservative party's policy.

We spend £3 billion a year on children's social services, on sure start and on the new children's fund. Now that the emphasis has switched from dealing with the consequences of neglect to the prevention of neglect, and now that there is a wide range of providers involving the

[Mr. Brown]

voluntary and charitable sectors and community action centres, it is right that there be a new review across Departments of all services for children at risk, to ensure that in the next spending round the children in greatest need, wherever they live, have the services that can best meet their needs, so that no child is left out or left behind.

As part of our spending review, a second review of the voluntary sector will examine how Government and voluntary sectors can best work together to help families and communities in need. In addition to the work done under sure start, to be taken forward in the spending review, a third review of our spending round on health inequalities will tackle the persistent and unacceptable inequalities in infant mortality and in child health.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: I will, but then I must move on.

Mr. Fallon: Now that the Chancellor has entered the realm of social policy—which is somewhat unusual for a Chancellor—can he clear up one point? Can he confirm that the Deputy Prime Minister has been moved to the Cabinet Office to be in charge of public services, that the Office of Public Service Reform reports to the Prime Minister, and that he himself is still in charge of cross-cutting reviews and public service agreements? Who is actually responsible?

Mr. Brown: I am talking about the spending review for next year. I know that very strange things happened under the last Conservative Government, but I think that spending announcements were still made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and that is precisely what we intend.

As for public spending control, the public service agreements are an innovation introduced under the Labour Government. They are designed to relate the expenditure of money to the targets and objectives set by the Government for meeting its programmes. The amazing thing is that in 18 years of Conservative government no real attempt was made to relate the spending of money to the priorities and targets set by that Government. I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman, as a member of the Treasury Select Committee, would welcome the fact that our spending review takes into account the public service agreements that set outputs and targets for the future.

All the measures that I have announced on child poverty today—the new integrated child tax credit, which will form part of the legislation in the tax credit Bill, the transfer of the Child Benefit Centre, and our three reviews of the voluntary sector, children in need and health inequalities—show that, for us, tackling child poverty and ensuring that no child is left behind is not just an economic and social imperative; it is, for us, a litmus test of any political party running for office.

I hope that all in the House understand that we could not move 100,000 lone parents back into work and lift as many as 1 million children out of poverty if we had done what some argued that we should do—abolished the working families tax credit, removed benefits from lone parents with teenage children, cut the social fund, and abolished the new deal for lone parents.

I believe in eradicating child poverty, and I believe the country understands very well that when lone parents are simultaneously denied help to find jobs and faced with a cut of £50 a week in their incomes—as was proposed by the Conservative party at the election—all the rhetoric in the world about social liberalism cannot obscure the fundamental economic extremism of that position. If the Conservative party wants to do some rethinking, this strikes me as a very appropriate place to start.

Let me turn to the public finances. Some staked their reputation on saying that our public services plans could not be afforded, that they were inflationary, and that they were unsustainable. I can tell the House that we will implement our public spending plans in full, and that we will now prepare for the spending round from 2003-04 to 2005-06. I can also say that, as well as providing free television licences for the over-75s and raising the basic state pension this April, we plan to pay the winter allowance of £200 this year; and our new pension credit, introduced in 2003, will reward rather than penalise modest occupational pensions and savings, to ensure that every pensioner enjoys a share in rising prosperity.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: I have given way enough.

Our obligations are international too. Diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria and HIV-AIDS are avoidable, and drugs are available to make them preventable and curable. This week the Secretary of State for International Development will announce further contributions from our Government to a new global health fund to tackle those diseases.

Our public service agreements—setting targets and demanding results—are key to securing value for money across Government. In advance of our decisions next summer on matching the resources in our public spending review to reform, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is setting up seven interdepartmental reviews to examine how we match our spending priorities for the next period with a stepping-up of modernisation and reform to ensure for the public the best outcome and results. The reviews will deal with central themes set out in our manifesto: children at risk, health inequalities and the role of the voluntary sector, public sector labour market issues, improving the use of public space, science and research and small business support.

Under the previous Government, Britain spent more on debt interest than on schools. The reason that we can invest more in health and education is that we have managed to transfer resources from paying the bills of failure to investing in future success. A total of £9 billion has been cut from the typical annual cost that Conservative Governments paid to tackle debt and pay for unemployment. That has meant that, each year, there is £9 billion more for the national health service and for education. That is what we mean by putting hospitals and schools first.

There is an even bigger question for the future of our public services: how to meet demographic, technological and expectation-led demands. Instead of the fundamentalist calls to shrink public spending on those services, the challenge for the future is to secure additional public investments as well as the reforms that

we need without putting at risk the economic stability that is so crucial. The detailed new policies that the Government are pursuing in the Queen's Speech—the tax credit Bill, the enterprise Bill and the other public service reforms—are central to the direction of our country in future. There are big questions about the role of Government which every political party will have to answer.

I understand from *The Times* this morning that the shadow Chancellor will announce in the debate that he will support all-women shortlists and more international aid. We welcome conversions to our policies but we remember what happened over the minimum wage: we supported it, the Conservatives opposed it; we succeeded, they recanted. We can explain our support and they cannot. Their new positions raise prior and profound questions about whether they are changing their policies because of opportunism or because of principle. Does the shadow Chancellor believe that decent minimum standards and social justice are necessary for a modern efficient economy?

Basic questions of principle inform the Queen's Speech. I ask the Opposition to address them, too. On economic management, it is not enough to say that the old era of rigid monetary targets is over. The question is whether we are to reject and set aside the short-termism of the old free market dogma in favour of not just a solid commitment to monetary and fiscal disciplines, but an industry, regional and skills policy that works with markets and businesses to equip this country for change.

On employment, it is not enough for the Conservatives to tell us as part of their rhetoric that they support full employment. The first question that we must answer—it is the pre-condition for a modern employment policy in the global economy—is will we reject the old, flawed laissez-faire policy and invest in an active labour market policy that is based on rights and responsibilities, but that lifts people from welfare to work?

On inclusion and opportunity for all, is it to be the illusion of inclusion for millions, or will we commit the substantial resources that everyone knows are needed if we are to tackle child and pensioner poverty? On health, do we choose to invest more in our NHS, as we have chosen, or do we instead make health care in Britain dependent, as some people want, on imposing new charges and private insurance?

Do we just talk about being internationalist and about Britain in Europe rather than Britain against Europe; or do we follow the logic for the national economic interest, as I do, that there are circumstances in which we will join the euro? No amount of policy launches, listening exercises or rhetoric about social liberalism can obscure the fundamental choices that have to be made.

Are we just to talk about good public services, or are we to modernise with the scale of money that is needed, rather than putting across-the-board tax cuts before the needs of public services and stability?

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): As a long-standing Tory democrat rather than a social liberal, who has throughout a parliamentary career of some length always supported high levels of public expenditure, and is on the record as saying so throughout the Thatcher years, may I ask the Chancellor to answer the practical

question of how his announcements of huge increases in public expenditure can be reconciled with his stability pact commitments to the European Union?

Mr. Brown: We are talking about public services, but Conservative Members can talk only about Europe. The stability pact asks for Budgets to be at or near balance. Last year, we paid back £36 billion of debt. The hon. Gentleman should be congratulating us on that. Additionally, if he looks at our figures for future years, he will find that public borrowing is at a level that is perfectly sustainable and perfectly adequate not only within the terms of the Maastricht treaty, but within the terms of the golden rule that I have established.

When we want to talk about the health service and education, only Conservative Members want to move on to talk about the European Union and whether we should be members of it. I think that the country wants us to have a debate on public services. If Conservative Members have not learned that lesson from the general election, I do not think that they will ever learn anything about how to run their affairs.

The question that I am posing is whether we are prepared not only to talk about good public services, but to invest the scale of money that is needed, rather than putting across-the-board tax cuts before the needs of public services and stability. That issue was raised most helpfully in the general election campaign by the shadow Chief Secretary, whom I am pleased to see in the Chamber today. We did not see much of him in the later stages of the general election campaign, when he gave a new meaning to the word "shadow". We talk of people who are seen and not heard, but he was heard and then not seen. That was a feature of the election campaign. However, although we had no idea where he was, we knew what he was saying. That is the dilemma for Conservative Members.

The shadow Chief Secretary said:

"You've got a progression which goes £4 billion, £8 billion, £12 billion, £16 billion, £20 billion. We would like to head downwards"—

in public spending as a share of national income—

"to 35 per cent. of GDP . . . It is 190 per cent. realistic to cut spending growth in this way."

At today's prices, to reduce public spending to 35 per cent. of GDP, which is the ambition of the shadow Chief Secretary—an ambition that he has never denied—would entail cuts not of £5 billion, £10 billion or £15 billion, but of £50 billion. It is the equivalent of the entire budget of the national health service. Everyone knows that such changes could not be achieved without deep cuts in all of our major public services. That is the choice: to invest or to cut. We say that we cannot will the ends—better public services—without being prepared to will the means, which are investment as well as reform.

I see that Conservative Members are getting a bit jumpy about the looming leadership election. For the Conservatives, it is a time for reflection, and they have quite a lot to reflect upon—not just a search for power, but a search for a minimum level of coherence in the way they put forward their policies.

Some of the main contenders for leadership have been out of the country. The shadow Chancellor left the night after the election to visit some ancient relics—these were not Conservative constituency associations—moving

[Mr. Brown]

effortlessly from one set of ruins to another. While we have been getting on with the business of Government, we have seen the contestants nightly on our television screens. They are closed off in a world of their own. They are nominated and then eliminated week by week in seemingly endless ballots. The last two are to be voted out by whatever is left of a dwindling audience of viewers. What we have ahead of us is the Westminster version of "Big Brother".

Like "Big Brother", the contest has already turned nasty. Newspapers are filled with accusations of backbiting, there are daily outbursts in front of the cameras and, increasingly, the rest of the contenders are turning on one man who is accused of disloyalty. At some point, the Conservatives will have to re-enter and face the world of reality. At some point, they will have to enter and face the world as we know it.

The theme of the Queen's Speech has been our commitment to improve public services. Last week, the shadow Chancellor said that his campaign theme was that he would be passionate about public services. However, on election night, in response to a member of the Conservative party who said that the campaign should have been about public services, the shadow Chancellor said:

"It would have been folly for us to concentrate on the issues—health and education—where Labour had the advantage . . . It would have been foolish of us to spend our entire campaign on the issues where Labour was ahead."

His folly last week is his passion this week.

How does this week's passion for public services square with the cuts manifesto that put large tax cuts before public service needs—a manifesto of which the shadow Chancellor said he was "very, very proud"? He was proud of tax cuts last week, while public services are his passion this week. How does his passion for public services this week square with his personal authorship of the £8 billion spending cuts plan last year? Was that an error? What about his statement that £8 billion of cuts was "just the beginning"—was that also an error? His personal conviction about the increased reliance on private health insurance—was that also an error?

Perhaps we should also look at the previous convictions that the shadow Chancellor has to his name. What about the record spending cuts when he was at the Treasury? Were they an error of judgment? His conviction about what he called an "ultra-low tax economy"—was that also an error of judgment? His conviction about "clear blue water" and shrinking the state—was that also an error of judgment? His conviction that the highest goal above all others was to minimise the state—in the context of support for more public services, was that also an error of judgment? His conviction about the poll tax being fair, a vote winner and misunderstood—was that also an error of judgment? Does the shadow Chancellor really ask us to set aside each and every one of his previous convictions?

It comes down to trust. Just as people will ask whether they can trust with the economy the Minister who, when Chief Secretary, gave us 15 per cent. interest rates, 10 per cent. inflation, £50 billion of borrowing, 22 broken tax promises and record mortgage reposessions and who was a principal architect of boom and bust, so, too, will they ask whether they can trust with public services the

Minister who has spent most of his political career, in government and opposition, as the torch bearer for the ultra-low tax economy and for a radical scaling back of the responsibilities for public services.

One day, the Tories will have to address their fundamental problem. Britain cannot be served by a party hijacked 20 years ago and still imprisoned by a wholly out-of-date and socially divisive dogma. For our part, stability is the foundation. Our policy is investment, not cuts. We say yes to targeted tax cuts for families, pensioners and work, we say no to irresponsible tax cuts, and in this Parliament we put schools and hospitals first. That is why I commend the Queen's Speech to the House.

4.35 pm

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): First, I draw attention to my interests, which are in the register.

I congratulate the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the election result, which means that he can continue in his office. I thought that his performance this afternoon was curiously edgy, nervous and bombastic—an out-of-date, old-fashioned sort of speech. I remind him that his party did win the election. It is over—he does not have to go over all the old arguments again. [Interruption.] As far as I could tell from looking at Labour Members, the only person in the House who enjoyed the speech was the President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook). He seemed to enjoy it very much indeed.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has shown a consistent interest in the plight of developing nations, and I am glad that that issue features in the Queen's Speech. Britain should play a role that is suited to our standing in the world in helping to relieve world poverty. As a civilised and relatively rich country, we should take pride in doing our duty. We must play our part in extending good governance around the world. We must do all that we can to reduce the causes of disease and of conflict. Even in terms of enlightened self-interest, the richer countries must see that money spent today reducing disease and eliminating the turmoil that gives rise to flows of refugees is repaid by the money saved on having to deal with the tragic consequences of those episodes. We must also work for global free trade, which is disproportionately to the benefit of the poorer nations in the world.

I also welcome the proposal in the Gracious Speech to make it easier for women to enter Parliament. The proportion of women here is too low. At this election, the progress made in 1997 has not been sustained. In my party, the under-representation by women is truly chronic. The Conservative party must put it right, and the Government's legislation may help us all in that respect.

Mr. Bercow: Given that there is now only one more female Conservative Member of Parliament than there was in 1983, and that that 18-year period has too often been characterised by studied inactivity in our own ranks, does my right hon. Friend accept that his recognition of the case for positive action to translate equality of opportunity from a phrase into a fact will be widely welcomed?

Mr. Portillo: My hon. Friend is very kind. I believe that the Conservative party must have the unshakeable

objective of increasing the representation by women in this House, and that that objective must be achieved between now and the next election.

On the economy, the Chancellor's mettle has not been tested in difficult circumstances. In the first half of the 1990s, 18 countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development experienced recessions, but in the second half, only five OECD countries suffered in that way. So the Chancellor of the Exchequer has steered the British economy only through calm waters. The economic conditions have been benign, and obviously we hope that they remain so. The Chancellor has been lucky, but he should ask himself whether his policies are robust enough if his luck should change. The world is more turbulent, as the Chancellor admitted during his speech.

In recent years, the United States economy has stimulated growth across the world. Last year, the United States grew by 5 per cent., but this year it is expected to grow by less than 2 per cent. United States manufacturing is in recession, retail sales have slowed and capital investment is down. Trade figures are down as well, which carries with it the threat that the United States problem may be exported and have wider effects.

Further afield, Japan's growth is unlikely to exceed 1 per cent. for the next two or three years. Germany is afraid that growth may have plunged to zero in the second quarter of this year. Growth in the eurozone in the past 12 months is down a full percentage point on the previous year, and industrial production has slowed. The European central bank has had to revise its growth forecast downwards; and European inflation, at 3 per cent., is well above the target. Iraq has suspended oil exports and withheld supplies. Crude oil now sells at \$27 a barrel and the price has recently been higher. Higher oil prices mean higher costs for businesses and families.

Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): On growth, is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the International Monetary Fund has cut in half its growth targets for the United States, from 3 per cent. to 1.5 per cent? It has also cut its growth targets for Germany by 40 per cent., but has adjusted only marginally its targets for the United Kingdom, which have moved from 2.8 per cent. to 2.7 per cent. The Treasury forecast is still 2.5 per cent. Does he accept that it is the chancellorship of the economy that is showing great strength in the global environment? While everyone else is seeing their growth cut, ours is still strong, which is a testimony to the good work of the Labour Government.

Mr. Portillo: Despite all the hon. Gentleman's good work during the previous Parliament in asking such questions, he remains on the Back Benches.

If there is to be less demand in the world economy, Britain must become more competitive just to maintain our position. We cannot be comfortable with the fact that our tax advantage, by comparison with that of our European competitors, has declined by two thirds since the mid-1990s. How can we be confident that the Chancellor will address the British competitiveness problem to which he alluded, when he refuses even to admit that the tax burden in this country has risen?

As we all know, the general election showed a dramatic drop in turnout. I believe that part of the disillusionment experienced by the public is caused by politicians failing

to be straightforward. People feel insulted when the politicians who drove up their taxes pretend to them that their taxes have not risen. They find it extraordinary that the Chancellor has no scruples about raising their taxes, and has scruples only about admitting what he has done. Today, he had the opportunity to state in plain English that taxes rose under this Government during the previous Parliament and to set out his view on whether they will rise during the current Parliament—and on whether it is right that they should do so. It is a shame that he did not take the opportunity to be straightforward with the House and the British public on that matter.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Geraint Davies), the Government like to pretend that the economy started to grow and unemployment started to fall on 1 May 1997. In fact, the economy has been growing since 1992 and unemployment has been falling since 1993. The OECD's view of the economy before the Government came to office in 1997 was this:

"The prospects for achieving sustained output growth and low inflation are the best in 30 years."

That was the situation that the Government inherited. Only a Government who were conscious of their under-achievement on the economy would devote more attention to trying to rewrite history than to trying to build on it.

The Chancellor's record has been mixed. The economy has continued to grow and unemployment has continued to fall, which are good things. However, the growth of the economy and the fall in unemployment have been slower since the Chancellor of the Exchequer arrived in his office. Our relative position has also declined. In his first Parliament, Britain's growth rate was lower and our inflation was higher than those of our competitors. That is the precise reverse of the position in the Parliament up to 1997.

Inflation has remained low and stable, as it was when the Government came to office, although the latest figures show that it has risen significantly. The Chancellor was right to make the Bank of England independent. [Hon. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] It is hardly new for me to say that. He was right to make the change, but he could have made better arrangements. The Monetary Policy Committee must be seen to be above political interference. That is especially the case if we are approaching a referendum on the euro. Even now, I urge him to make more transparent the selection of Monetary Policy Committee members and to limit them to a single term, albeit longer than that which they presently serve, in order to establish that they are clearly independent of the Chancellor.

Over the past few days and, again, today, the Chancellor has talked about productivity. He told us back in 1998 that productivity was

"a fundamental yardstick of economic performance".

He said today, with unusual frankness, that the quest to improve productivity had eluded us. To be more precise, it has eluded him more than it eluded the previous Conservative Government. Between 1992 and 1997, productivity growth was 2.3 per cent. a year. Since he has been Chancellor, it has averaged 1.8 per cent. a year. It is only by increasing productivity that we can increase the long-term rate of growth in our economy.

If the Chancellor of the Exchequer had a genuine agenda for improving productivity, we would be the first to support it, but he does not seem to understand that it is

[Mr. Portillo]

not the Government who improve productivity; businesses and working people do that. In a wonderfully telling sentence, he said that "we" have created 170,000 new businesses. I do not believe that he has created any new businesses—certainly not if he stuck to the rules of the House. He has a misconception of how wealth is created and of the people who are responsible for it.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): First, may I thank the right hon. Gentleman for visiting my constituency during the election campaign? It was extremely helpful. Secondly, if the Conservative party is in great peril, is not the shadow Chancellor part of its problem?

Mr. Portillo: That was a stinging arrow, from which I have not fully recovered. If the hon. Gentleman is alluding to the leadership contest in the Conservative party—which I think, clumsily, he is—most of the candidates are associated either with the catastrophe of 1997 or with that of 2001. My unique contribution is that I am associated with both.

A recent survey by the Institute of Directors shows that entrepreneurs typically spend six hours a week complying with Government regulations. That is time that they cannot devote to improving their businesses—time which is taken away from the search for ways in which to be better and more productive. There was a time when Britain could feel relatively smug about how smoothly the machinery of government operated in this country compared with the bureaucratic complexities of some of our European neighbours, but we are now horrendously bureaucratic. The foot and mouth crisis was a snapshot that revealed to many of us what the country has become. We saw any number of different Government agencies tripping over each other. No one had the power of initiative or authority. Many farmers watched in dismay as officials were sometimes more concerned about protecting their own patches than dealing with the problem.

It is a similar story when we talk to constituents, as I am sure hon. Members on both sides of the House do. People who apply for benefits are often sent on the most extraordinary bureaucratic treasure hunt in which they are passed from person to person and office to office. The machinery of government is increasingly unable to relate to people as people, whose complicated problems may defy bureaucratic templates. Under Labour, the cost to business of complying with regulations has risen by £5 billion a year. Last year alone, the Government introduced 3,865 new regulations, which was a record. It is true, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) said, that as a consequence of the neglect of the bureaucratic burden, Britain has slipped down the competitiveness league table, from ninth position to 19th.

The Chancellor is fond of saying that Britain needs to learn from America and to become more deregulated, but Americans have dubbed the Prime Minister "red-tape Tony". [Interruption.] Labour Members obviously do not read the world's press, but they should because they would find out what the outside world thinks of the Government. The Queen's Speech contains absolutely no recognition of the problem that Britain faces.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): The right hon. Gentleman referred to the problems that our constituents face when chasing around office after office. Does he accept, therefore, that the previous Administration made a mistake when they demerged the jobcentres and benefit offices?

Mr. Portillo: The hon. Gentleman needs to focus on the future.

Mr. Miller: I asked a straight question—answer it.

Mr. Portillo: I am not going to get into it. I believe that everyone in this country—bar the Chancellor of the Exchequer, perhaps, but certainly including the hon. Gentleman's constituents—knows that bureaucracy has increased enormously in the past four years. I do not claim for a moment that the increase in bureaucracy began only four years ago. I am not in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's black and white school in which it is said that everything that happened before 1997 was perfect. However, the Government's neglect of the problems of regulation and bureaucracy is extraordinary.

The Chancellor has already massively increased the cost of government, and he plans to go on increasing it during this Parliament. Whatever he may have said for party political reasons during the election campaign, he knows perfectly well that the Government could save billions of pounds, which they currently waste, if he would only put the same effort into controlling bureaucracy as he puts into bullying his colleagues.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) *rose—*

Mr. Portillo: I am sorry, but I was only picking up what Mr. Alastair Campbell said when he described the Chancellor as an out-of-control colossus—not an expression that I would apply to him at all.

Richard Burden: I am listening intently to the right hon. Gentleman's new measured tones and his emphasis on looking to the future, but I want to find out exactly what he is now saying about public services. Now that we are beyond the cut and thrust of the election campaign, can he tell the House whether he has changed his mind about any of the Conservative's public spending plans and statements? Has there been any change from what he said during the election campaign? Has there been any change at all in his new guise?

Mr. Portillo: Obviously, the hon. Gentleman had that question written for him before I delivered the last paragraph before he rose in his place, because I have just very clearly said that when spending £400 billion a year—£12,000 a second—of the public's money, it simply is not credible to go to the country and say, "We cannot possibly spend a penny of this money better. We are spending every penny of your money perfectly." The hon. Gentleman's constituents know perfectly well that that is not true. If he went around his constituency claiming that schools and hospitals would close if we tried to save

£8 billion out of £400 billion, it may account for the fact that so many fewer people voted for him this time than last time.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Portillo: Yes, but I obviously ought to make progress at some point; I do not want to test the patience of the House.

Mr. Blizzard: The right hon. Gentleman has just referred to the ideas on trying to save £8 billion from the Government's Budget. He claimed that he could save that money many times during the election campaign. Clearly, not many people believed him. On the few occasions those plans were put under scrutiny by media commentators, they fell apart. Let me however accept for the moment that he believes that he could have saved £8 billion from Government spending. If he is committed to public services, why did he not commit that illusory £8 billion to public services rather than tax cuts?

Mr. Portillo: Well, I shall come to the reason for that in a moment. The reason is that—[*Interruption.*] I am giving the House a preview of the bit that I shall come to. As the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said, the point is that this Government have made the poorest people in society poorer. [*Interruption.*] Well, the hon. Lady said it, and she was right. One of the reasons why the poorest people have got poorer is that they have borne the brunt of the stealth taxes imposed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer—but I shall deal with that point in a little more detail in a moment.

There are real concerns about the balance of the economy. Consumer spending is strong, but the savings ratio has halved and Britain's share of world exports is down. We have a record balance of payments deficit, and the Chancellor predicts in the Red Book that it will continue to grow. Balance of payments deficits can be funded so long as people are confident that the economy is doing well. Those things can change very suddenly, but there is absolutely no sign that the Chancellor is concerned in any way. That lack of concern about the balance of payments deficit may prove very unfortunate for the Chancellor, as well as the country.

A strong economy is the pre-condition to any Government's plans. Economic stability allows families, too, to realise their ambitions to buy a better home, to make provision for their retirement, to provide opportunities for their children. The tax increases of the past four years have blunted our competitiveness, and people can see no evidence that those tax increases have led to improved public services. I have never heard the Chancellor say that lower taxes make a country more competitive and that higher taxes do the opposite. Perhaps he would like to tell us this afternoon whether that is his belief. We hear the Chancellor talk about reducing taxes for business, but the director general of the CBI has said:

"The reputation of the UK as a low tax economy . . . is under serious threat".

The funny thing is that, around the world, Governments of every political persuasion are busy cutting the taxes in their economy, and it is the Chancellor who is swimming

against the international tide. Britain's taxes rose by the equivalent of 10p in the pound on income tax during the previous Parliament.

Now, the Government plan rises in public spending during this Parliament faster than the average growth rate of the economy. During the entire election campaign, the Chancellor refused to tell us whether such above-trend rate growth in public spending was the plan for the next two years or the longer term. Is he just turning on the tap now in order that he can turn it off almost immediately, or is he planning for public spending that will, of necessity, require higher taxes? Whenever one asks him those questions, he tends to resort to talking about his rules, but his rules allow him to tax and spend as much as he likes. The only rule is that, as he spends, he must raise taxes in order to match it.

During the election campaign, the Chancellor considered it a terrible affront that we should ask him which taxes he was thinking of raising during this Parliament. The question was wholly legitimate, since tax rises are indicated by the rate of public spending growth to which he is committed. He repeated his promise during the election campaign not to increase income tax at either the standard or higher rates, but will not make other commitments. He will not even make commitments relating to other taxes on people's incomes, and will not say whether he will raise or abolish the ceiling on national insurance contributions, which, effectively, would lead to a 50 per cent. tax rate on middle-income Britain. He had another opportunity in the House today to make clear what he intended. Raising the issue has at least brought to his face the first smirk of the afternoon.

The Chancellor now plans to subject one half of Britain's pensioners to the indignity and nuisance of means testing. During one passage in his speech, I think that he meant to say that he was planning that people should have retirement in dignity, but it sounded like retirement indignity. I am afraid that the latter is indeed what the Chancellor is planning for. This is the man who promised that he would remove means testing from pensioners altogether.

The proposed increase in means testing has important social consequences. The Queen's Speech promises us a pension credit, but that is made necessary by the penalties for saving that the Chancellor has introduced. Indeed, the pension credit itself will increase penalties further up the income scale.

The Chancellor has spoken today about his plans to tackle child poverty, and that is of course a very laudable aim. However, in referring to the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington, I ask again whether that is credible from this Government, since the Chancellor's stealth taxes have hit the poorest hardest. Since 1997, the poorest fifth of households have seen the sharpest rise in the share of their incomes that must be passed to the tax man. As the Chancellor has said, this Parliament will see huge changes in credits payable to families. We on the Opposition Benches will study those proposals very carefully, but I fear that the Chancellor will, as usual, create a system that is too complicated for people to understand and full of anomalies and perverse incentives. Characteristically, he cannot resist meddling; he cannot resist micro-management. He wants to live everyone's life for them.

[Mr. Portillo]

During the last Parliament, the Chancellor had to show that he could manage the economy better than his Labour predecessors. Given the fiascos of previous Labour Governments, that was not so very difficult. However, he failed completely on his principal promise, which was to improve the public services.

We in this country used to be able to say that Britain had the best health service in the world. We cannot say that now. People in pain are being made to wait far too long before getting the treatment they need. Many people in this country have to wait more than a year for heart surgery, compared with two months in either Germany or France. In modern Britain, people with heart disease die while waiting for their operations. Britain's children do less well at school than children in Germany or France. Extraordinarily, the proportion of adults in Britain who are unable to read and write is among the highest in the industrialised world. In education, as in health, we should be willing to look humbly at what other countries have done to see how we can do things better.

Whole communities today feel defenceless against crime. Criminals lord it over residents in some of our worst estates. Many women are afraid to go out at night and many elderly people are afraid to go out at all. Our transport system is failing us. Our roads are congested and our railways are chronically unreliable. No one could reasonably have expected the Government to transform our public services overnight, but people had hoped for some improvement and they have seen no sign of it. The Prime Minister was careful during the election not to repeat his claim that we had 24 hours to save the national health service, but he can never resist giving a hostage to fortune: now he promises that services in this country will become of world standard. That is the yardstick by which he will be judged.

The size of the Government's majority allows them to make whatever reforms they consider necessary to the public services. Who could possibly stop them? They have an entirely free hand. If the Government can deliver changes that make a real difference to people's quality of life, the Opposition will support them; but if the Government cannot do that, they will be completely out of excuses.

The Government have targets for recruiting more doctors, more teachers and more police officers. A target makes a good soundbite during a general election, but it is no substitute for a policy. The Government are struggling to retain the professionals that we have in service today. The GPs have threatened to walk out of the health service, there are teacher shortages, and police morale is being undermined.

I ask the Government to recognise that it is their own interference that has driven our public servants to despair. Labour's style of government—the style of government that seeks a headline every day for a new initiative every day—drives to distraction the unfortunate people who are supposed to implement Whitehall's bright ideas while trying simultaneously to deliver a service that works to the public. Our professionals today are longing to be left alone to work effectively in their chosen vocations.

We live in the age of the internet, at a time when people have unlimited access to information. Ours is a less deferential age in which people expect to use their

initiative and to be able to innovate. The time of national plans and centralisation is over, but the Government show absolutely no sign that they recognise that. Just as businesses see a Government who talk deregulation while imposing countless new regulations, so public servants see a Government who talk decentralisation but hand down ever more directives to them.

The Government themselves now aim to be the nurse, the teacher, the police officer and even the parent in every home. True, they now promise greater freedom for teachers and say that more money will be given directly to head teachers. That is what the Conservatives have long advocated, but the Government have always been scornful. If the Government's is a genuine conversion, we shall be delighted, but is it genuine? Can we believe that of a Government who organised the abolition of grammar schools, scrapped grant-maintained schools merely because they had been invented by the Tories, and scrapped the assisted places scheme merely because Labour believes that if not everyone can get on a scheme, no one should be allowed to do so?

The Government spent much of the election campaign claiming that they would reform health care. There were hints that they would be willing to build new partnerships with the private sector, breaking down the absurd ideological division between the two sectors. We Conservatives have long advocated a practical approach based on getting the best possible treatment for patients, but over the years the Government have simply misrepresented our policy and derided us for it. If the Government have now been converted, I welcome that. But again, can we believe them? In the previous Parliament, Health Ministers abolished GP fundholders just because the Tories had invented them. The Secretary of State for Health described work by consultants in the private sector as

"one of the seven deadly sins".

This very day, he is out briefing again, emphasising the negative aspects of co-operation between the two sectors in health. It was he who proposed that consultants should not be allowed to practise in the private sector within seven years of signing a contract with the national health service.

That takes us back a long way. Even Nye Bevan, when he set up the NHS in 1947, recognised that it needed the support of consultants with a mixed practice in the private and public sector, which is why he introduced pay beds in NHS hospitals, so that consultants could treat their private patients there and the NHS could afford to use their skills. Under the present Health Secretary, we have moved backwards from Nye Bevan's stance.

Ms Abbott: I have listened with rapt attention to a fellow alumnus of Harrow county grammar schools. The right hon. Gentleman spoke about morale among public servants. Is he seriously suggesting that morale was better before 1997?

Mr. Portillo: It is wonderful to see my schoolfriend here. Yes, I am seriously suggesting that morale was better then—the hon. Lady ought to be deeply shocked by that. Because she is a true believer, she genuinely believed that the problem with morale in the NHS and teaching was caused by a Conservative Government. She had in her mind the soothing idea that, as soon as Labour came to office, those problems would be put right, but she must admit that she has been disappointed.

There was no occasion under a Conservative Government when three quarters of GPs said that they would be willing to resign their NHS contracts; that simply did not happen. We did not have four-day weeks in many schools, as we have today, because we did not have as big a crisis with teacher morale as we do today. My unequivocal answer to the hon. Lady is that, however she describes the situation four years ago and however much it horrified her, she must now grapple with the fact that morale in the public services is worse today than it was four years ago. Unless the Government can free themselves from their ideological shackles, I do not expect them to make much progress. I do not deny for a moment that, following its defeat, the Conservative party will have to work hard to win the public's confidence on services to the public. We will do so with an open mind and a willingness to study what works elsewhere.

The Government's economic policy during this Parliament may be dominated by the question of the euro. Recently, it was curious to see the Government campaigning for re-election, supposedly wanting to focus on the economy, but unable to tell the public whether or not their economic policy was based on the premise that Britain would have its own currency and set its own interest rates. The Conservative party learned during the election that most people agree that Britain should have its own currency, but we also learned that, for now, the issue is not uppermost in most people's minds; they will take an interest in the question of currency if and when there is a referendum. For now, they want us to address their main concerns of education, health, transport and crime; we should listen to what they say about those issues.

I am glad that this week we shall see the emergence of two groups representing business people, one group in favour of having our own currency and the other against. This is a good time for a debate between business groups. The arguments about whether giving up our currency would be good or bad for business are not by any means the whole issue, but they are clearly an important part. The Conservative party's views, and the views of those in the party who disagree with the party leadership, were set out clearly during the election campaign and, in my view, can now be given a rest.

In the previous Parliament, the Government enjoyed good luck, on which I congratulate them. My worry is that, during that short four-year period, when global conditions ran in their favour, they developed a sense of invulnerability, which is the enemy of prudence. They eroded Britain's competitiveness and committed us to levels of public spending that will erode it further. They are indifferent to the balance of payments problem and unconcerned about bureaucracy growing like a leylandii—[*Interruption.*] It is a fast-growing plant or, more exactly, a tree that can be a great nuisance to one's neighbours.

When the Government talk about the need to reform services—

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Paul Boateng): The Opposition do not know much about horticulture.

Mr. Portillo: Representing Chelsea, I resent that very much.

The Government talk with forked tongue about the need to reform services. Each briefing that the Government give the media points us in a different direction. They favour radicalism one day, the next day they pour scorn on any change to the arrangements that were set in place in the 1940s.

I foresee another four years during which the public will be disappointed by a Government who will be unable to live up to the expectations that were raised during the election campaign. For the Conservatives, it must be four years of hard work on the policy areas where we have failed to convince, on the issues that matter most to the public. Under whatever leader the party may choose, I am confident that that work will be done.

5.10 pm

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): We usually come to the Queen's Speech with a sense of relief that the general election is over. Given the performance of the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), it is clear that the show will continue for some time. It is rather depressing that, rather like the Bourbons, Conservative Members have returned to this place having forgotten nothing and having learned nothing.

It is depressing that a debate on the economy, on industry and, understandably, on social services should, from the Conservative standpoint, be unspecific about the nature of improvements in social services. They have not shown that any lessons have been learned over the past four or five weeks about improvements in conditions of business, competitiveness and enterprise.

Conservatives continue to hammer on about regulation and the burden that it imposes on business. When I talked to business people in my constituency during the election, I was relieved—given past experience, I was somewhat surprised—by their response to questions about the Government's handling of the economy. Indeed, there was almost praise. I would be going too far if I said that Labour was given a dazzling write-up, but there was not the hostility of the past. There was frustration among many traditional Conservative-supporting business people that they could no longer support the party that they had backed for most of their adult lives.

Former Conservative voters did not support the Conservative party because they felt that the party was singing from a hymn sheet that, if considered relevant, was certainly discordant with present times. When it came to addressing the need to improve competitiveness, it was felt that the Conservatives had little to offer.

Many of us have had discussions with friends from America. Some of us have had the opportunity to visit the United States to see how the economic revolution of the 1990s and the first part of the present decade has progressed. It is important that we learn—the process has already started—that it is no longer the business of government to create a climate in which failure is punished. Individuals who have been unfortunate to see their businesses go down should not be denied the opportunity to start afresh. It is common in the US for it to be said, "Perhaps it is better to give money to people who have failed in business because they have learned the harshest and severest of lessons in the hardest way. At least these are people who know what the world is about."

The Conservative party does not say anything about how to help industry and to make life easier for individuals whose businesses, for whatever reason,

[Mr. Martin O'Neill]

have gone through difficulty. Given the bankruptcies, disruption to businesses and loss of housing, for example, that was commonplace in the 1990s, especially in the early part of that decade, one would expect Conservatives to begin to examine the issues.

The United Kingdom also has the problem of attracting money to business. One of the interesting and encouraging aspects of the past four years is the renewed enthusiasm for backing small, start-up businesses. The Chancellor has gone a long way in helping to bring venture capital to many fledgling businesses. I welcome his success with the European Union and the Commission in gaining agreement on the venture capital funds for regional development that he will make available. That is the final piece of the jigsaw for regional development agencies, which will not only have funds of their own, but be able to afford access to additional moneys for businesses that need support and assistance.

It has already been said that perhaps the most telling aspect of the Government's approach was shown by one of their first actions in the early days of the previous Parliament when they established the independence of the Bank of England. The shadow Chancellor made an interesting point about lengthening individuals' service on the Monetary Policy Committee, but only for one term. Perhaps we should consider that. Closer attention could be paid to aspects of the MPC's activities and terms of reference, but it is early days in the Parliament and we have only four years' experience to draw on.

The Bank of England's findings and outpourings now enjoy a special status. Last week, the *Financial Times* reported that it had pointed out the dangers of the two-tier economy: the successful, dynamic business and financial service sector and the sluggish, deteriorating manufacturing sector. There are qualifications of that stark divide. Indeed, several financiers from across the political spectrum, who have written a letter that appears in today's *Financial Times*, point to the threat to our financial services of remaining outside the eurozone for too long.

Opening the debate is worth while, because, in the previous Parliament, Labour Members at least paid insufficient attention to the impact of our absence from the eurozone on the manufacturing sector. It is fair to say that the biggest problem was not our absence in the 16 to 18 months of its existence, but the high value of sterling and the impact on exports to other eurozone countries.

In the past, Ministers said that our competitors—for example, the Federal Republic of Germany—had to contend with a high or overvalued currency, and that the Germans coped with that for many years. Like the United Kingdom, Germany had low inflation and interest rates, but it also had a climate that was conducive to high investment in staff and equipment. Our understandable reluctance to introduce training levies to fund skill improvements or to create additional skills is no excuse for not using fiscal instruments such as tax credits to finance training.

The Government have correctly identified the digital divide as one of the major barriers to employment mobility. They have been imaginative and supportive in introducing tax relief on computers and help with information technology training, but surely it is sensible

to extend such schemes to ensure that support is provided when new equipment that incorporates IT is introduced, for example, in engineering. Greater assistance could be given with training and providing training grants for firms that use new equipment.

My interests in the area are documented, and I am not engaging in special pleading, but the Government ignore at their peril the present plight of engineering and manufacturing. It is certainly fair to say that too much of the potential profit, which would be the source of such investment, is being denied because margins are being slashed to sustain price competitiveness with other contenders in the eurozone. The failure to invest means that any short-term benefit that could be gained from price cutting will soon be lost as our competitors with a lower cost base invest using resources denied to us.

All the bold initiatives in the enterprise for all programme, which I welcome, will require more time and support as soon as they can be put into place. Twelve months ago, some of us were saying that we hoped that the gap between the pound and the euro would narrow: our optimism was, sadly, premature. That is due in part to the continued attractiveness of sterling and the dollar, and in part to the lack of confidence that many people have in the structure and control systems of the eurozone, particularly in relation to the European central bank.

As I said earlier, one of the Government's great successes has been the Monetary Policy Committee. I wish only that the countries of the eurozone had the courage to adopt a similar framework. Whether we must await changes in structure or the achievement of the five goals to the Chancellor's satisfaction, if we have to devalue and change to become members, Ministers must grasp that nettle.

Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend think that the success of the Monetary Policy Committee—in terms of its constitution, its being transparent and its proceedings being minuted, for example—offers any lessons for the European central bank? The ECB is a black box whose proceedings are not minuted and which is difficult for the markets to understand. The limit on 2 per cent. inflation—as opposed to 2.5 per cent. plus or minus 1 per cent.—means that, in some senses, it is not only misunderstood but, arguably, relatively deflationary.

Mr. O'Neill: It is fair to say that the MPC represents, in many respects, the brightest and best in the economic field in this country—or, at least, the brightest and best who choose to make themselves available. It is fair to say that, in the European Union, the need for everyone to have a seat at the table and to be represented means that the body may be representative but not necessarily effective. Given the other constraints that my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Geraint Davies) has identified, there is a great deal left to be desired.

I noted the point made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor when he expressed concern about the way in which the ECB operated. While that is not one of the five conditions, it is perhaps one of a subset of additional anxieties that he is known to express from time to time about the working of the eurozone. We shall need to look at this institution before we shall be able to join it.

Ministers must grasp the nettle and explain the advantages for business and employment of the currency that they support but do not, as yet, wish to join.

The Government were probably right to avoid confusing the electorate before polling day, but we need far more positive signals now. We should be under no illusion—our view on the five conditions must also include an indication of the euro value at which we would be prepared to join.

If such a package could be announced, it would be at that point—and only at that point—that a Bill for a referendum could be introduced. Assuming that that were to happen within the two years that the Government have set themselves, we would perhaps be talking about June 2003—I suppose, after the local government, Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections. We could then consider the passage of the legislation, and a referendum could probably be held in September 2003, with entry into the system taking place 18 to 30 months later—perhaps in February 2005 or 2006. Entry could take place later, but that would have implications for a general election in 2005. On the other hand, the matter could be delayed even further.

Whatever happens, it is abundantly clear that the argument in favour of a common European currency has yet to be put to the British public with sufficient clarity and concision to convince them that sharing power over monetary matters with our European partners will help our export competitiveness and give greater influence over the operation of the currency while still allowing us a degree of independence to establish our own fiscal and social priorities in a way that will benefit people and encourage them to support the new currency.

Failure to address those challenges will deny the British public access to the truthful and responsible information on the issue and jeopardise the confidence of the same European partners with which we need to work so closely on so many other Community issues.

There is much in the Queen's Speech that I am happy to support. The enterprise for all initiative has built on much of the work of the Clinton Administration and of my colleagues on the Trade and Industry Committee, in which we argued the case for relaxing a number of fiscal measures, an improvement in respect of capital gains and creating the opportunity to introduce new capital to businesses by removing certain penalties, which did not encourage people to invest.

We must not only unlock the doors of many closed businesses, but help businesses in which families have been reluctant to give up control, even though successive generations of family members showed no interest whatever in the business. The old guard would say that giving up their controlling interest was not in their financial interest, but, with an imaginative approach to capital gains tax, that will begin to happen.

I would like to think that we could begin to establish an equity economy such as that which is not uncommon in certain parts of California. In return for services, expertise and assistance of a sort hitherto denied to many small businesses by the corraling character of capital gains tax, fledgling businesses would be able, with equanimity, to hand over part of the equity in the business to people who join it.

All that, plus a willingness to encourage competition and to root out the cartels and cronyism that often infect areas of our national business life, is to be welcomed. I wish every success to my right hon. Friends at the Treasury and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State

for Trade and Industry, who is in her place. Like me, she has been impatient with cartels. The previous debate in the House in which we both spoke was on motor car prices and it was clear that a sharp axe had to be taken to that Gordian knot. Although it has not quite severed the knot, we have begun to get to the bottom of the problem.

In a number of examples, in a more competitive environment and with a more fiscally friendly approach to the structure of business, we are achieving the breakthroughs that we need. I would only ask my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Secretary of State to reconsider the ways in which we could seek productivity increases. Productivity lies at the heart of our economic regeneration, but if we cannot get our people to produce more and better-quality goods, all the rest is just empty rhetoric.

I wish my right hon. Friends good luck in their endeavours and I welcome the Queen's Speech, but let us look to the future and try to achieve even more than we anticipate achieving. The Queen's Speech represents an excellent start that enjoys the confidence of the country. It certainly enjoys the confidence of the good people of Ochil and the business community there. Although I have not always regarded it as the strongest supporter and friend of the Labour party, that is the strong message that I got at the election, and I welcome the opportunity to say so today.

5.29 pm

Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): I apologise to the House, but for family reasons I shall not be present for the winding-up speeches.

This debate is important for two reasons. First, it started with a debate between two people openly contending for the leadership of their respective parties, and not doing so terribly well. Secondly, it considers the fundamental issues that are likely to dominate the Government's path in the next four years. It is about the delivery of public services, and the degree to which that is about putting money in or about reform and change in the method of delivery. That issue is already dividing Labour Members of Parliament and those in the Labour movement, and is likely to be the crux of the debate.

The fundamental issues are also reflected in the debate on membership of the euro. The shadow Chancellor said that his party should now set that issue to one side in its campaigning. I take him to mean that he believes that the Conservative party should no longer campaign for or against the euro. He said that two business groups had been set up, one for and one against membership, and that the matter should be left to them. That seems remarkably similar to the position of the Chancellor, who also believes that the debate on the euro should be left to business, so that he need not dirty his hands with the issue.

This Parliament is also likely to be dominated by the question of the degree to which the private sector should be brought increasingly into play in public services.

Mr. Portillo: I am accustomed to being misrepresented most of the time on most things, but it was perfectly clear from what I said that the British people will want to debate our membership of the euro and that they will want their political parties to be involved in that debate when

[Mr. Portillo]

the issue is ready for a referendum. The timing of that remains with the Government. As no referendum is in prospect, I made the remarks that I did.

Matthew Taylor: I think that the shadow Chancellor confirmed that he believes that his party should not campaign for or against the euro until a referendum is called. That seems remarkably similar to the position that the Government, and certainly the Chancellor of the Exchequer, have adopted.

It was interesting to see the first outing of the revised version of the shadow Chancellor's approach to campaigning—or perhaps I should say the shadow leader of the Conservative party's approach. It was rather like attacking the Chancellor of the Exchequer with a pillow. I am not convinced that trying to be nice will necessarily deliver victory for the Conservative party. It has not worked for us over several decades, but we are always willing to offer advice on such an approach.

I want to deal with the imbalance in the economy. It is odd that a debate on the economy has involved so little discussion about where we stand. The Chancellor seems to believe that there are no problems facing us, and the shadow Chancellor scarcely touched on the issue, except to outline a policy to do the same as the Labour party but fractionally more efficiently with fractionally less waste. The truth is that there is a serious imbalance in the economy.

Internationally, American manufacturing industry is slipping into recession, and both the United States and Europe face real difficulties. However, our greatest concern should be about the British economy.

On the face of it, many things are going well. Growth in consumption in the year to March 2001 was 2.6 per cent. Consumers in the United Kingdom are still spending: private sector consumption is higher than that, at 3.2 per cent. Housing growth is about 7 per cent. On the year, and inflation remains very low. However, we see a different picture in farming and manufacturing. It is a picture of an economy in real difficulties. History has always told us that if we have real difficulties in the manufacturing sector and yet sustained, substantial growth in consumption, we shall run into all sorts of economic difficulties.

Industrial production and manufacturing output both fell in the first quarter, while services continued to grow almost as strongly as those fell. As a result, imports grew twice as much as exports. The Bank of England's agents report continued weakening of manufacturing in sectors including information and technology, which has provided something of an engine for the support of manufacturing exports in recent years. Productivity growth continues to be weak by international standards.

The economy is seriously unbalanced, which is reflected in services price inflation of 3.8 per cent. in April, compared to a slight fall in manufacturing prices.

Geraint Davies: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the reason why productivity growth is low but rising is simply that in recent years we have experienced a massive influx of unskilled labour, which is reducing average productivity? The pattern of average productivity in the United States is of very low growth, below that in the

United Kingdom, which has risen now that it has reached a high threshold of employment. That is a sound foundation on which to build productivity that is accelerating.

Matthew Taylor: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's view, on two counts. First, the history of investment in manufacturing under Labour has also been poor: the investment that might deliver later higher productivity growth has not been adequate. Secondly, one factor above all characterises the United States—a continuing large influx of low-skilled labour into employment. In fact, one of the real attributes of the United States economy has been its ability to encourage people into employment, something at which this country has historically been rather poor.

At its latest meeting, the Bank of England pointed out that the strength of sterling and the weakening world economy would lead to lower interest rates in the medium term, except that that might worsen the imbalances in the British economy that I have described. It drew attention to the very problem that I have illustrated, which it rightly described as a key policy dilemma. This is not something that the Bank of England, through interest rate policy, can resolve alone; Government policy is needed to address it, and we believe that it can be addressed only if we recognise that there is currently a real problem with the exchange rate with the euro. Government policy needs to take that into account, and I share the concern of the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) in that regard.

I have argued here in the past that if the Government made clear their exchange-rate targets in connection with our joining the euro—the levels at which they believe joining could be sustainable—that in itself would drive us towards a more sustainable exchange rate, as it drove every other European country that joined in the first round. That is exactly what we saw happening after the election, when the markets believed that there might be an early move to the euro. As soon as that happened, they started to focus on a long-term sustainable exchange rate rather than on short-term speculation.

Mr. Fallon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way yet again.

The hon. Gentleman has asked the Government to clarify the exchange-rate target that they should be pursuing. Perhaps he could clarify what he thinks the target should be.

Matthew Taylor: We have published a document that examines the conditions for joining, which includes an exchange rate in the range from 1.25 to 1.45 euros to the pound. That document is now nearly a year old. Clearly, any Government will have to look at the position at the time when they join, but we could hardly be clearer than we have been. Indeed, ours is the only party that has been willing to provide any answers. Some Labour Back Benchers have made the case, as have many outside, but few Front-Bench Members have made it here.

Mr. O'Neill: I do not want the hon. Gentleman to confuse me with others. I think it very dangerous for Governments to think aloud about exchange rates. Only when other decisions are made should such an eventuality be considered. I consider it foolhardy of those on the

Government side to start talking in an airy-fairy way about an exchange rate two, three or four years away from the possibility of a referendum. We should be very careful: we would see serious problems in the money markets if we went down that road. I hope that only when we were near to offering the country a choice would the Chancellor and the Cabinet arrive at an appropriate range of figures. No one worries about what the Liberals say, but a lot of people depend on what the Government say.

Matthew Taylor: The former Chairman of the Select Committee on the Treasury might disagree with the hon. Gentleman. In the previous debate on the matter in the House, the former Chairman took exactly the position that we take. Since 1997, 500,000 people in manufacturing industry and nearly 80,000 people in farming have lost their jobs. That was closely associated with the problems of the exchange rate. They might beg to differ with the hon. Gentleman. Certainly, many in British industry would.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Did not my hon. Friend find it odd that, when the pound was beginning to go towards competitive levels, which was taking some of the pressure off our manufacturing, agricultural and tourism industries, Her Majesty's Treasury started to talk up the pound, making the imbalances in the economy to which he has rightly referred even worse?

Matthew Taylor: My hon. Friend is right. We must understand that the history of the Labour party—the devaluations in the 1960s—may make it difficult for it to address those real issues, but real they are for those in the manufacturing and farming industries who are attempting to make exporting pay. The sooner those taking responsibility for our economy acknowledge the fact that jobs are draining away day by day with the present exchange rate, the better it will be.

Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Matthew Taylor: I have given way to the hon. Gentleman and I shall make a bit of progress.

I do not want to give the impression that the problems in farming and rural communities are to do merely with the exchange rate. The problems in those communities are severe. There is a crisis there. Any hon. Members who campaigned in rural areas during the general election cannot fail to be aware of that—Labour Members as well as others. I hope that those Labour Back Benchers who represent some of the more rural communities will, as we will, vigorously press the Government for more effective action to tackle the crisis in rural areas—the absence of measures to do so was one of the worst omissions from the Queen's Speech. It was as if a crisis were not happening. I assure Ministers that that crisis is happening: it is there strong and hard for all those in rural communities who have lost services, jobs and homes—for many farmers, the farm is their house as well as a source of income.

I turn to the issue that I thought might be pressed further today: the future of public services. Recession or not, the Government's cautious assumptions should mean no short-term problems for Government spending plans. Indeed, the assumption of 2.25 per cent. trend growth is

arguably over-cautious, but just as in the general election we argued that the Government should be judged on their record on public spending over the previous Parliament as a whole, not simply by pre-election spending, the Government will be judged in the next election on their overall record over their two Parliaments.

There are serious questions. The Government's spending plans run only to April 2004 and the new ones will be announced only in June 2002, so we have no picture of Labour's plans for the second half of its term in office, but, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has identified, if public spending were to continue to grow at the current rate of nearly 4 per cent., there would be a gap in Government income of some £10 billion. Of course, the Government have not announced that spending plan. The Conservatives were wrong when they said that there was a tax gap—a funding gap. There is actually a spending gap.

The question is not how the Government will fund their plans, but what their plans will be in the second half of the Parliament. That goes to the fundamental issue of delivery on pensions, education, health and the other public services. The issue is whether the Government believe that there is a need to fill further the pot for investment in public services, or whether their current spending proposals have gone broadly far enough. If they believe the latter, after the feast in the general election campaign, we shall see a return to famine in the second half of this Parliament.

The argument that growth will deliver all is made both by Conservative Members, who say that growth will fund tax cuts, and by Labour Members, who say that growth will fund their never-ending spending increases. However, if it were true that growth delivered all, the Thatcher years would have been a time of enormous bounty in the national health service. Year after year, the Thatcher Government used precisely the same argument: that economic growth delivered sufficient real-terms increases in health spending.

The truth, however, is that wages dominate public sector costs. Consequently, the public sector can deliver more nurses, doctors, operations and teachers only if wage growth is less than economic growth, unlike the private sector. As the figures clearly show, that is exactly what has been happening: the wages of those working in the public sector—teachers, doctors and police officers—have been held back.

In the previous Parliament, on average, real-terms private sector wage growth was more than 15 per cent., whereas it was only about 10 per cent. for doctors and teachers and about 6 per cent. for police officers. Moreover, that erosion has been not just a short-term process, as improvements have been delivered for a much longer period by restraining public service pay levels. In the 1990s, in real terms, private sector pay levels exceeded those in the public sector by almost 10 per cent., with nominal growth of 42.7 per cent. in public sector pay compared with 51.4 per cent. in the private sector.

It is the Government's misfortune that that disparity has reached such a point that they are having real problems in recruiting and retaining staff, whereas the previous Government encountered largely complaints about the disparity. The real problems of recruiting doctors, nurses, teachers and police officers are now visible to everyone, and they are one of the main reasons why the Government

[Matthew Taylor]

failed to deliver the improvements that they promised in the previous Parliament. Ministers have made some money available, but they have not been able to find enough people to fill even those posts because the rewards are not sufficient.

The issue is about not only pay, but conditions and the never-ending revolution in health and education that makes the job unbearable for many who simply want to get on with treating and educating people. Nevertheless, pay is now a real issue.

I should like finally to touch on the issue of bringing the private sector into the provision of public services, as if that were a panacea. The Government are offering private sector involvement as a partial solution, whereas Conservative Front Benchers seem to offer it as the only solution. However, a couple of myths need to be demolished, the first of which—it has clearly suckered the Deputy Prime Minister, although I very much doubt that it has suckered any Treasury Ministers—is that bringing in the private sector will unlock new revenue sources that would otherwise be unavailable.

On 20 June, on the "Today" programme, the Deputy Prime Minister said that, "if you can prime" transport investment

"by private money, you can reduce the pressure on resources that are available for education and health."

The fundamental truth, however, is that the Government have to pay for public services regardless of whether they are delivered by the private sector or the public sector. Private sector involvement is not a panacea for a shortage of public funds. As those in the public sector know, they are being forced into involving the private sector as a way of getting round Treasury rules. Local government especially is being forced down that route. However, on no basis can it be seen as free money; those services have to be paid for one way or another.

The Institute for Public Policy Research, effectively, made the case today that if the private sector is to be used in the delivery of public services, it must be on the basis that it can do something better than the public sector. In some way, the private sector must be able to get better value for money or deliver more caring services more efficiently. Whatever it is, there must be some such benefit.

The problem is that Treasury dogmatism has not allowed a level playing field in the assessment of whether the private sector brings real benefits, issue by issue. The IPPR demolishes Labour's case on National Air Traffic Services and London Underground almost as effectively as many Labour Members and the Mayor of London have already. If we are to judge use of the private sector, it must be on the basis of effective competition, with alternatives. If something can be delivered more cost-effectively and efficiently in the public sector, it can only be ideology that drives the Government into using the private sector.

Yet all the studies show that, in many cases, the decision is not taken on the basis that there is an effective public sector comparator, showing that the private option is cheaper. We need effective comparators that allow the

public sector and other alternatives to be tested so that we ensure that the private sector is not used when it will waste public resources.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): The hon. Gentleman's argument does not allow for the fact that a number of public sector projects over the years have been over-budget and overdue; not just the Jubilee line, which was the most recent case, but a stream of hospital projects. The 39 hospital projects now using private finance initiative money are not in that realm at all. If we were not to recruit expertise from the private sector—which the hon. Gentleman seems to oppose—a large part of the Government's planned investment would go down the drain in wasteful and inadequately managed projects where the risks were not shared adequately with the private sector.

Matthew Taylor: I challenge the hon. Gentleman to come up with authoritative studies that support his position, because all but one have shown that money has been wasted by going down the PFI route. The IPPR report does not even attempt to defend the use of PFI. We know full well that public sector projects may sometimes overrun, but so undoubtedly do those in the private sector; the channel tunnel link is the most damning example of them all. However, if the hon. Gentleman is confident of his position, I am sure that he will agree that it is important that we test it against proper comparators and with the proper exposure of figures. The Treasury has not made the comparators public, nor has it been willing to publish the evidence.

Mr. Beard: When the Treasury Committee looked into the matter, we had before us an analysis by Arthur Andersen that showed a range of different projects—both IT and construction projects—for which the average saving was 17 per cent., compared with the public sector comparator. The evidence appears to have been dismissed by the hon. Gentleman.

Matthew Taylor: The answer is that I made the exception of that one study. The Andersen study is always the one quoted by the Government, but it was based on expected savings and not on those achieved. Those savings were often not delivered, as subsequent reports on these projects have shown. If the Government are so confident of their position, why do they not make the information on the comparators available? They hide behind commercial confidentiality; it is hard to see how the public sector comparator could be a matter of commercial confidentiality.

Geraint Davies: The hon. Gentleman should know that a number of studies by the National Audit Office were reported to the Public Accounts Committee, which has a summary of them, and show that a large number of the PFI projects do work.

Matthew Taylor: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that although a series of reports have been published, the Government always quote the Arthur Andersen report because it is the only one to support their position. The survey was based on expected savings, rather than delivered savings.

Do not get me wrong; I am not arguing that there is never a role for the private sector. However, just as in the past—when the Conservative party made the mistake of believing that privatisation was always right, no matter what—we now see Labour Front Benchers going down the same route; arguing without being willing to show the public sector comparator that the use of private finance is a benefit. Indeed, they distort the position on the “Today” programme and elsewhere by pretending that they are making available new money, rather than spending Government money in a different way that can be judged only on the basis of whether it delivers better services.

There is one final point that I want to make. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] I have probably spoken too long for Labour Members and for the Deputy Speaker. However, my final point was not touched on by the IPPR. Labour Members ought to look at the report if they seriously believe that there are no real problems with delivery; there are, and the Government must address them. One area, however, is scarcely touched on by the IPPR and it is the area about which we in this place should be most concerned: accountability.

There is real concern about people's ability to have a real say over how their public services are delivered and developed when the process is taken out of the hands of publicly accountable authorities. That is particularly so, given the appalling record in the public sector of setting contracts in terms that protect the public when the private sector is brought in. We have heard of everything from the selling on of contracts at huge profit—which can only mean huge losses to the taxpayer or that we are forgoing funding for improvements that might otherwise have been made in the public sector—through to hospitals suddenly finding that their patients are being charged for services that were forgotten about in the contracts. PFI hospitals that even charge people for receiving incoming telephone calls are just the tip of an iceberg of Government ineffectiveness in using the private sector effectively in public services.

This may be the defining issue of this Parliament, not least because the Government may duck the euro issue, and it will be fundamental to the future of our public services. Those, mostly on the Labour Benches, who believe in the importance of public services and in a national health service and a national education system that guarantee high quality to every child and every patient will know that getting this issue right would mean great improvements in public services. However, getting it wrong could mean that we lose the argument to the Conservative party for ever. Therefore, I say that they must tread carefully.

5.58 pm

Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): I realise that pride comes before a fall, but I stand with some considerable pride as the new Member of Parliament for Rhondda. I am proud for two reasons. First, Rhondda is the only seat in the country to have been represented by a Labour man ever since the constituency was created and miners were first allowed to vote, in 1885. Secondly, for any Welshman, the Rhondda is the epitome of our industrial heritage and takes a special place in the hearts of all Labour men and women, especially those from Wales.

My predecessor, Allan Rogers, took a similar pride in representing Rhondda, something he did for 18 years. I know that many hon. Members will agree that Allan was

a persistent and determined representative of the people of Rhondda and a committed and loyal parliamentarian. He was a Member of this House through the toughest of years for mining communities and most of his time was spent on the Opposition Benches, yet his work as shadow Defence spokesman during the Gulf war, on the Security and Intelligence Committee and in the Inter-Parliamentary Union won him respect and friendship from Members across the House. I pay tribute to him.

There are those who have said, however, that I am scarcely the stereotypical Member of Parliament for the Rhondda, with its macho image and non-conformist tradition. Apart from anything else, I am, thanks to the now repealed House of Commons (Clergy Disqualification) Act 1801, the first Anglican priest to take a seat in this House for 200 years and the last person ever to have resigned his orders under the Clerical Disabilities Act 1870—a recondite piece of legislation that has also now been repealed. It is, I suppose, no surprise that my career has been referred to as more of a *Daily Mail* headline than a curriculum vitae.

Most of the stereotypes concerning the Rhondda are inaccurate. Contrary to public perception, the Rhondda is not one valley but two—the Rhondda Fach and the Rhondda Fawr. Its two rivers no longer flow black with coal dust but have herons and wild mallards nesting there. I am sure that Ferndale rugby football club will forgive me for saying that our most successful sports team in recent years is not a rugby team but Britain's premier women's basketball team, the Rhondda Rebels.

The arts have played a central part in the Rhondda's heritage. Not everyone in the Rhondda sings, although we have at least three truly first-class male choirs—the Treorchy, Meibion and Pendyrus. Nor does everyone play in a brass band, although we have the best brass band in the country. That is not a vulgar boast but a simple statement of incontrovertible fact, as the Cory band, formerly the Ton Temperance band, is not only the British brass band national champion but the British open champion. This is the only time that both titles have been held by one band at the same time.

The Rhondda's most famous son was neither a Labour leader nor a rugby player, but an actor. The star of “The Guns of Navarone”, “Zulu”, “The Cruel Sea” and the rather ambitiously named “Sodom and Gomorrah” was one Stanley Baker, who was born in Ferndale and died, aged 49, in 1976, only a month after having been knighted. His ashes are scattered on Old Smokie, the tip behind my house.

Like all the south Wales valleys, the Rhondda is often portrayed by the London media as parochial and xenophobic. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Rhondda has always welcomed strangers and foreigners. After Paul Robeson's visit to the Parc and Dare theatre in Treorchy many years ago, he was made an honorary Welshman. Thanks to the influx of Italians from the village of Bardi, I suspect that we have more Italian cafes in the Rhondda than in Kensington and Islington combined.

As for political myths, Conservative Members—the few that there are—will be delighted to know that there are many Conservative clubs in the Rhondda. It was said that if everyone who drank in a Conservative club in the Rhondda voted Conservative, the seat would have been Tory for 150 years. I am delighted to say that the people of the Rhondda stick to just drinking Tory.

[Mr. Chris Bryant]

One stereotype about the Rhondda is, sadly, true. Ever since steam coal was first found in Dinas in the 19th century and the Klondike rush for black gold began, the Rhondda has suffered significant social problems. Many of the most deprived wards in Wales are in the Rhondda. Although unemployment has fallen dramatically under Labour—from 13.9 per cent. in 1997 to 7.9 per cent. and going down today—still far too many people are unable to work. Ill health, especially in the form of chronic conditions such as atherosclerotic heart disease and diabetes, are a modern plague. For too many households, the only income comes from the benefit system. Four in five people in the Rhondda own their own home but many of those houses suffer from terrible damp and are, frankly, unfit for human habitation. Drug abuse, especially heroin, claims an enormous clutch of lives every year.

Where do the solutions lie? First, the Rhondda relies on a Government who are committed to sound finances and to combating unemployment. It depends on a Government who are committed to a minimum wage. I particularly welcome the commitment to increasing the minimum wage for young people. The new deal has made a dramatic difference to hundreds of young people whom I have met in the past year.

Secondly, the Rhondda is not unique in being a geographically hemmed-in community. Like others, we need the infrastructure that makes employment and new businesses a possibility. We need both traditional infrastructure, in the shape of roads—most notably a relief road for the Rhondda Fach—and modern infrastructure, in the shape of high-speed wide-band access. One of the most successful recent ventures in the Rhondda is the Pop Factory, a television and new media studio based in the old Corona factory. I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members remember the advertisement about every bubble having passed its fizzical. This and other ventures need the Government to ensure the fastest possible roll-out of broad-band services. The new economy must be for the whole country, not just for a few.

Thirdly, we need a real assault on the causes of chronic ill health, including alcohol and drug addiction, so that more people want a job and are able to hold one down. Incidentally, many of the Rhondda's health problems are still the legacy of the mines. Although I recognise the significant steps that the Government have taken to hurry through miners' compensation, no Labour Government can rest until justice is truly and finally done to all our miners, their widows and dependants.

Fourthly, we need a new spirit of enterprise so that young people do not spend their last year at school wondering where they will be signing on but when they will be starting their first job. I heartily welcome the Government's declared aim of seeing more than 50 per cent. of young people going on to university, but I urge Ministers to do everything in their power to remove any obstacles that prevent young people from poorer communities and families from going on to college.

The people of the Rhondda are not looking for handouts. People simply want a chance to stand on their own two feet, to build a decent life for their family and to retire in dignity. These are honourable aspirations, and my constituents still look to politicians to make a real

difference by waging an all-out assault on the pernicious and often seemingly intractable causes of poverty. Those aspirations are what democratic politics is all about. That is why I believe that the democratic system is so important.

It is not for a newcomer to lecture the House on its practices, but one of the reasons for young people—and, for that matter, not so young people—failing to take an interest in politics is, I believe, because the way in which the House does its business is still incomprehensible to the majority of the population. They hear of a debate and a hefty majority vote in Parliament to ban foxhunting, for instance, and presume that that is the end of the matter. They do not understand why it still has not become law. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will be able to make significant progress on further reform in this House. However, the system is often not as complicated as people think. I was telephoned the other day by someone from a Minister's office who asked whether I would care to come and meet the Minister for tea. When I recounted this to my largely unpolitical partner, he replied, "I didn't know there was a Minister for Tea. Can I be Minister for Scones?"

Before I finish, I wish to refer to the first Member of Parliament for the Rhondda, William Abraham. He devoted his first speech, in 1886, to arguing for the disestablishment of the Church in Wales. Mabon, as he was known, said that the Church of England had entirely failed to meet the requirements of the people of Wales. In the spirit of his words, I am delighted that the Queen's Speech includes a commitment to complete the process of reform of the second Chamber, but I still find it difficult to comprehend why it is the exclusive preserve of the Church of England's Bench of Bishops to provide spiritual advice in this place. I believe that Britain would be far better served by a fully secular state, and that the Church of England's political contribution would be far stronger were the Church to be fully and genuinely independent. If we are to retain the Lords Spiritual—I say "if" because I would prefer a fully elected second Chamber—surely they should include representatives of all the faiths and denominations.

In conclusion, the socialism that I espouse is based on some simple moral facts. The market was made for humanity, not humanity for the market. Poverty is not a mysterious dispensation from on high, but has very human causes and is susceptible to human remedies. Inequality gnaws at the moral fabric of society. I refer the House to the words of a former Member of this House who was also a priest in the Church of England, although in a different order from my own. As John Donne said:

"No man is an Island, entire of it self . . . any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."

I welcome the Queen's Speech, because it expresses that same belief in hard, practical and pragmatic measures, to ensure a strong and stable economy and to improve public services—measures that give new hope to the people of the Rhondda.

6.10 pm

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): It is a great pleasure and honour to congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant) on his outstanding maiden speech. It stood out as a model maiden speech

among those that I have heard. We have been told that hon. Members should use such speeches to make interesting and non-controversial remarks and to promote their constituencies. He did all those things, and many of us will feel like going to the Rhondda for our holidays, having heard about all those temperance bands and Conservative clubs. However, the great thing is that he spoke with sincerity. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House will wish him every success and happiness in his future membership of the House.

It is a great pleasure and honour to speak again as the newly elected Member of Parliament for Rochford and Southend, East, where the Conservative party had a rather remarkable result. We not only gained a substantial swing, but secured a 54 per cent. share of the vote, which I am told makes the constituency the 10th safest Conservative seat in the country. In fairness, I point out that that result was not unique. Essex was rather remarkable, as we achieved similar swings in such places as Upminster and Romford, where we won seats from the Labour party, and in Dagenham, where a previous Labour majority of 17,000 was slashed to such an extent that we think we can win the seat next time.

I mention those facts, which are in many ways irrelevant, only because all the candidates were good, solid and true Conservatives. That might make people think twice about the idea being promoted almost everywhere by those who suggest that the way to recovery for the Conservative party is for it to adopt policies of delicate confusion that are only slightly to the right of Ken Livingstone. The party may find that other solutions have more merit.

I want to make six points, the first of which concerns the single currency. I assure my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) that I am not making any sort of personal attack. He said that we should not mention the issue, but there are some aspects about which we must speak. I returned to the House after the election only because I was looking forward to taking part in arguments on the referendum, which is the last battle over Europe. The impression that I gain from the Government and from people connected with the banks is that the referendum is unlikely to occur in this Parliament, if at all. However, that is not the issue. The Government must give serious consideration not to whether we should prepare for a referendum to enter the single currency, but to what on earth we and our colleagues in Europe should do if that currency collapses, like every previous one.

That point must be considered, because all hon. Members, including the small number of enthusiasts for the single currency, must be aware that the British Government, the American Government and even the Japanese Government have been doing all in their power to boost the value of the euro, without any real success. We know also that the Governor of the Bank of England was told to sell a massive amount of gold and to put 40 per cent. of the proceeds directly into euros, even though that meant a massive loss for this country. Although that has been done, the euro has still been unable to recover. The hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard), who was a member of the Select Committee on the Treasury, will be aware that Eurobonds have been issued as a further means of trying to promote the currency.

If hon. Members look back, they will see a plain fact: in respect of all previous single currencies—I can find records of only 11 such currencies—the same thing always seems to happen. First, one area becomes artificially prosperous, as the Republic of Ireland has. Another area then begins to suffer serious hardship, as has begun to happen in Germany, whose Minister of Finance said recently that he was now thinking in terms of zero growth. There is also concern among German banks. A bank chief called Hans Reckers said:

"There is in Germany a . . . combination of factors that could lead to recession."

Business analyst Paul Hoffmann said that a recession before joining the currency would be

"the financial equivalent of the D Day invasion being stopped on the beaches."

Although hon. Members may want to ignore it, there is increasing depression and worry in Germany. We have found in relation to all single currencies that widening gaps mean loss of confidence, falling value and interest rate rises.

Mr. Beard: Will the hon. Gentleman explain how the dollar has survived?

Sir Teddy Taylor: As the hon. Gentleman knows, a single currency can survive only if there is one Government, one Treasury and a feeling of nationhood. America has one Government and a Treasury that controls its affairs. It also has a feeling of nationhood. If one tells people in New York, "We're doing something nasty to you, but it will help people in Florida", they will understand, as they view Florida as a part of the same nation. However, if one were to tell people in Sweden that something nasty was being done to help people in Greece, they would think that something rather strange and unusual was happening. I say to the hon. Gentleman and to other hon. Members, some of whom remain enthusiastic about the single currency, that they should look around the world at every previous example of such a currency.

There have been two such examples in Europe: the Scandinavian and Latin currency unions. One might think that the Scandinavian project should have been an ideal union, as it involved the joining together of countries that had no great differences, and ask why it did not work. It failed for the same reason that single currencies never work. If that happened in respect of the euro, what would the Government's policy be? In the Conservative party, things are special, as we are not expected to talk about the issue, but no matter who is in power, we will have to face up to the situation and ask what must be done.

I suggest that we must find some means whereby European countries can disengage if circumstances work out as I suggest. Of course, it is possible that I am wrong. I fully accept that I might be mistaken, but I suggest that all the available evidence of previous single currencies shows the way they go. If we do not make appropriate provision, there could be disaster not only for Europe but for all the countries associated with it. I hope that the Government will give some indication of what plan they would follow if things went terribly wrong, as the evidence shows pretty overwhelmingly that that is what will happen.

The second of my six points is a straight question: what will the Government do about the extension of the European Union, which is very important for jobs in the

[Sir Teddy Taylor]

United Kingdom? When the people of Ireland were given a democratic opportunity to express their opinion, they wanted to say something, as has happened frequently in the European Union. Unfortunately, the EU has been depriving people of such opportunities. The people of Ireland were the only ones who were given a chance to express their views on the Nice treaty and we know what they said. If the people of Germany were given a chance to say what they thought about the single currency, they would throw it out of the window. The people of Ireland had a chance to decide, and they said, "No, we don't want the Nice treaty."

Extension of the EU could have substantial costs for Britain. Various European grants come to Britain. They are not of much help to us, because every pound costs us at least £2 before we start, but if the European Union were extended, most of them would disappear. That would have consequences for jobs, as well as for agriculture. Nobody in agriculture wants to talk about the basic problem of massive over-production in the European Union. Nobody wants to face up to that problem because there is no solution. If Europe is extended, the activities that will occur in at least two of the new member countries—Poland and Romania—will mean a massive increase in agricultural production. What would happen at that stage? What is the Government's policy?

What worried me most about the Irish decision was that when the people of Ireland said no, which should have meant that Nice did not go ahead, EU officials made various statements indicating that they would proceed irrespective of those views. If the people of Ireland do not change their views, will the Government make it abundantly clear that they will not try, by one means or another, to extend the European Union? The principles of the EU have been undermined in many ways. Unless we are prepared to stand firm and ensure that a member state does not get something that it does not want, we will be letting those principles down.

The third issue that concerns me is economic stability. During the debate on today's private notice question, I asked about asylum seekers. The Minister for Police, Courts and Drugs said that it was unfortunate that I raised that subject. As someone who has never stirred up such problems, I can only say, in all sincerity, that I have seen good race relations seriously undermined in parts of London, in Southend and elsewhere.

One joy of coming to Southend from Scotland was that there was none of the religious tribalism that unfortunately still exists in Glasgow and other areas. There were good relations between the different races and religions. Indeed, Southend has two mosques and two synagogues. However, the situation has deteriorated alarmingly. A friend of mine—a Turkish Cypriot licensee of a restaurant in Southend—was abused in the high street and told, "Go home, asylum seeker." Another friend, whom I know very well, is a lady from South Korea who has two delightful children; she received similar treatment. I am not saying that Southend is special. Hon. Members know that such behaviour goes on. I accept that it is not an easy issue to resolve, but the basic problem is that the public have gained the impression that asylum seekers are not being dealt with effectively.

I hope that the Government will introduce legislation to ensure that speedy decisions are reached. Let me give a simple example. A couple from the Congo came to my surgery on Saturday. The London borough of Barnet—I do not know which party is in charge of that organisation—dumped them in Southend in the Palace hotel, which is neither a palace nor a hotel, more than a year ago. The couple have not heard from it since then. Their lawyers wrote two letters to the Home Office in February and May asking what was happening and what decisions had been made about them, but they have received no word or acknowledgment. Anyone who tries to pretend that such problems can be easily resolved is misleading people. However, something must be done if we are to preserve good race relations because they are a desperately important part of our community and vital for jobs and prosperity.

Fourthly, on public services, special attention should be given to the problem of seaside resorts. The Minister will know that they have a higher proportion of elderly people who require more attention from the health service. In addition, there are housing problems. The concentration of bed and breakfasts and houses in multiple occupation means that we have more homeless families. Rochford, as I have mentioned to the Minister before, has been treated appallingly by Governments of both parties. It has £400,000 less in annual grants than it received six years ago. It would help enormously if Ministers paid brief visits to seaside towns because they would then realise that their problems are special.

My fifth point relates to something raised by the hon. Member for Rhondda. I know that all Governments have problems of one sort or another, but it is important that this Government tell the truth on employment and related matters. I know that the Minister, whom I greatly admire, tells the truth on everything. I hope that she can tell me what the reference to foxhunting at the end of the Queen's Speech means. I appreciate that people are fanatical and passionate about that issue. Some people care more about the welfare of foxes than the welfare of democracy; others consider the abolition of foxhunting to be a greater threat to our democracy and freedom than anything else.

It is crucial that we are told what is happening. As someone who is part of an unpopular minority in my party on the issue, I have the impression—rightly or wrongly—that the Government are not pursuing it. Instead, we will have another private Member's Bill, a long discussion, with everyone shouting at each other, and nothing will happen. Some people will say that I am wrong, but the Government should tell us whether they have changed their mind and, if so, why. People who are campaigning on both sides want to know the score. If any Labour Member wants to intervene and explain the position, I shall be happy to give way. I have the impression that no one is clear. The sooner we have a straight answer, the better.

My final point is extremely important. I gained the impression—perhaps because of my advanced age—that local authorities face problems, especially on housing, that are more serious than they have been for a long time. When I arrived in Southend 21 years ago, there was one multistorey block of flats that everyone wanted to live in. Unfortunately, because of two or three impossible tenants, life in those flats is becoming unbearable for most people. Local authorities are spending more money on maintenance of housing schemes than before, but the

activities of small groups of people make it difficult to keep up standards. Local authorities cannot do much about that because of Government rules and regulations on what action can be taken on the removal of tenants. We must face up to the problem fair and square and say that there is a case for concentrating in particular areas difficult tenants who make life impossible for others, and to focus public services on assisting them.

I hope that I have not bored the House. All I have done is raise issues in which I believe passionately. We will be in deep trouble if we do not face up to them. Unlike the hon. Member for Rhondda, who has just arrived in the House, I have been here for about 37 years and have rowed with all parties and many individuals. One thing worries me more than anything else. Although hon. Members make interesting speeches and give wonderful orations, they do not want to face up to and talk about many issues, such as the single currency or bad tenants. I wish they did because then, irrespective of who might win the election, more people might come out to vote for MPs.

6.27 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): I assure the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) that he rarely bores the House. I, too, pay tribute to the graceful and self-confident maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant). He paid a justifiable tribute to his predecessor and constituency while giving a flavour of his political philosophy and what motivates him. He will have a long and distinguished career in the House.

I am pleased to speak in a debate that was opened by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. Much has been made of the distinguishing characteristics of this Parliament, but I do not believe that they will be the referendum on the euro or the involvement of the private sector in the public services. Instead, I hope that it will be distinguished by the fight against child and pensioner poverty and the campaign to bring about full employment, all built on a platform of fiscal stability and prudence. Major progress in those aims and adequate funding for public services will distinguish this Parliament.

Before I deal with public services and the role of the private sector, I want to address three other issues. My constituency, like the Rhondda, is a former mining area. Since the creation of the Labour party, such areas have been served by Labour party representatives and, before that, by trade union activists in the mining industry. Sadly, the mining industry was destroyed for vindictive reasons by the Conservatives. They can never be forgiven for that act and its impact on the communities that we represent. We are trying to lift them up off their knees, where they were left by the Tory Administration. The task of regenerating those areas, villages and communities has only just begun.

Four years seems a long time in an individual's life, but it is a relatively short time in the life of a community. During the election campaign, I was confronted with utter desperation, serious deprivation, absolute poverty and the most acute problems, not just in one or two areas, but throughout the former pit villages, which now have nothing at all, not even the infrastructure with which to attract new industry.

We face very difficult problems on the Yorkshire coalfield, especially in Hemsworth. Although we are bringing about regeneration at a macro-economic level,

we must carefully consider the creation of micro-economic tools to attempt to tackle the acute pockets of deprivation found throughout the country, especially in the coalfields.

No doubt the Chancellor's emphasis on the role of regional development agencies is part of the thinking that suggests that we must somehow reach down much more sensitively into the areas where small pockets of deprivation continue to exist. I look forward to the regional development agencies being developed in the next four years. However, those agencies are not accountable in the way a democratic body would be, so at some time or other we should move towards elected assemblies, to which the local population gives its consent. I am sure that the consent of the local population would easily be found in Yorkshire. I should like elected regional assemblies to deal with regeneration.

There is a particular problem with long-term disabled and long-term sick people in our communities. Probably about 2 million people are not included in the economic register and thus not counted among the unemployed, but there are large numbers of long-term disabled people and we must find ways to help them back to work wherever possible.

Drugs have become a very serious problem in the mining villages and probably elsewhere as well. In the area that I represent, the people who push drugs into our communities are gradually winning the war and there is a sense of hopelessness among those communities. Only last Monday, I met some people in South Elmsall, in my constituency, who told me that the drug pushers are waging war on their community. We need to see rapid action.

The Queen's Speech refers to increased powers for those in the criminal justice system. I welcome those powers, but we need far more police on the streets and in the communities—perhaps more than we have committed ourselves to in the manifesto. The war against drugs must be won, because the cancer of drugs is rotting away all the neighbourhoods, villages and communities that we represent.

I want to mention the problem of housing. A housing Bill will be introduced to address some of the points made in the housing Green Paper. However, the most acute problems identified in the Green Paper will not be addressed in the first round of legislation. In particular, I refer to those areas where no demand exists for the houses that are for sale.

It is impossible to sell houses in communities such as the City and Fitzwilliam, or the Bronx, in South Elmsall, because there is absolutely no demand for them. A street of those houses could not be sold for £5,000 or £6,000. People are trapped in those communities. They are unable to escape and they are gradually sinking further into deprivation. We need urgent action to tackle such low demand, where it is a problem. I know that it is not a problem everywhere throughout the nation, especially not in the south, but it is a severe problem in my constituency.

Allied to that problem, but separate from it, is one that involves private landlords. Unscrupulous private landlords have taken over large amounts of very low-cost housing without a care for the tenants who have been placed in that housing. That has led to the further deterioration of the very communities that I have described. Somehow or other, I hope that we can find a non-bureaucratic

[Jon Trickett]

technique to license and control private landlords, where their activities are clearly generating further deprivation, poverty and disorder.

In particular, I want also to refer to the public services. Clearly, the adequate funding of our public services represented the dividing line between the parties at the election. We know where the Tories stand; they are in favour of reducing public spending and, as a corollary, the public services. We must ensure that the public services are adequately funded, but reform is allied to that issue. I would not defend the existing structure of practices in the public sector in all its aspects. The Morrisonian model, on which most of our public services are based, is hierarchial and, in many cases, bureaucratic and unresponsive. Its structure is frequently insensitive to the needs of the customer. Its management systems are frequently uniform, rather than diverse. Clearly, it urgently needs reform.

I should be happy to see the modernisation of the public services, together with adequate funding. A modernising Government should be involved in reducing the number of layers of management, in tackling bureaucracy and in creating heterogeneity in the public services. I cannot however accept that introducing the private sector to the public services is the solution.

I stand on my political record as someone who has wanted to modernise the Labour party and our country. As the leader of Leeds city council, I did a lot to try to modernise services. When I was elected to the House at a by-election, I made it clear that I was a moderniser. For the first 18 months, I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who is the arch-moderniser, and I had no trouble with that at all. But modernising the public services in the public sector is one thing; introducing the private sector is entirely different.

I may be quite a rare being in the House—I was a manual worker in the private sector building industry for 12 years or so, and I know precisely how the private sector works and how poor its management often is. I do not believe that the private sector is a paragon either of managerial excellence or even of particularly cost-effective service provision. There is a range of reasons why one should be extremely cautious about the introduction of the private sector to the public services. I do not believe that it has yet been shown that private sector provision is cheaper than public sector provision. There have been several studies, and the best that can be said is that they are not conclusive.

From personal experience, I do not believe that private sector management is necessarily and inevitably more efficient than the public sector. The records of some of the larger public sector construction projects that have been led by private companies are, at best, uneven. The private sector is arguably good at cutting costs and making efficiency savings. That would be its claim, but that does not inevitably mean that it is good at providing high-quality public services, especially as those services tend to be monopolies such as those that exist in health, education and, in large parts of the country, transport.

The private sector does not understand social exclusion at all, while the public sector is largely about addressing the processes of social exclusion. In fact, I would argue

that the private sector is in large part the engine of social exclusion rather than the solution to it. It remains to be demonstrated that private sector solutions to social exclusion can be found.

Geraint Davies: My hon. Friend mentioned that entire rows of houses in his constituency are worth £6,000. Does he agree that the keys to getting rid of social exclusion in his area are regional development agencies, lower capital gains tax, the attraction of venture capital, and investment in transport infrastructure in order to connect his people to the market and to provide more skills; and that the private sector is a crucial, central part of that process of creating prosperity?

Jon Trickett: I was talking about the public sector provision of health and educational services, rather than housing, but let us take the example of housing. Those of us who are slightly older than others in the House clearly remember the inter-war period and before, when private sector slum landlords operated over huge tracts of our country. The process of social exclusion in housing is one of the most disgraceful episodes concerning the private sector in this country's social history, throughout the previous century and the one before that. My hon. Friend's example of housing precisely illustrates my point.

It was only at the end of the first war, when councils—the public sector—began to construct social housing with gardens and adequate sanitation for reasonable rents, that the problems of social exclusion through housing were resolved. Notwithstanding all that, I accept that the private sector may have a role in housing renewal and regeneration, but that was not the point that I was making. My hon. Friend's choice of example was very poor.

I was talking about social exclusion and how the private sector is an engine of it, not a panacea. The Government's choice of the private sector as an instrument to tackle social exclusion is unusual. The use of the private sector in public service provision will result in increased fragmentation of government rather than joined-up government, which is what we are supposed to be about. If we want to bring together the various agencies of government to tackle social exclusion—perhaps in the pit villages that I represent—we should be trying to form a coherent pattern of public services. To do almost the reverse and use the private sector as a service provider—perhaps in education or health, rather than building council houses—will fragment and make more difficult the process of holistic regeneration. So I am terribly worried about the fragmentation of services that might follow such policies.

Introducing the private sector to public service provision will blur the lines of accountability, which are very clear in the public sector. If one introduces private sector companies to the public services, the question will be: in whose interests will those private companies operate? Somewhere or other, the role of shareholders must play a part. The accountability of employees, the board of directors and everyone in the private sector will thus be blurred, once again raising the question of fragmentation versus coherence.

I have already mentioned my doubts about the competence of the private sector, particularly in the construction industry, which I know very well, so I will

not repeat the points. *[Interruption.]* One can usefully caricature the difference between public services and the private sector. It can be summed up in two words: service, which I have already mentioned, and profit. The public sector is there to serve people; the ethos is strongly one of service. Private sector companies, however, are ultimately set up to produce profit. I do not want to condemn the profit motive, but profit and service can be separated where profit is threatened.

For all those reasons, I warn my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Government—in the most polite and gentle way, having been a loyalist and a moderniser throughout my time in this House—that some of us on the Labour Benches will not easily accept the introduction of the private sector to public service provision.

6.45 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): It is a huge honour and a matter of great personal pride to address this House for the first time as the Member of Parliament for Epsom and Ewell. I have the great privilege of representing what I suspect is one of the few constituencies known around the world for its famous racecourse and Britain's most famous horse race. I also suspect that I am one of few Members of Parliament able to stand on the highest point of his constituency and look down across the valleys at the Palace of Westminster.

The Epsom and Ewell constituency covers not simply the borough of that name, but the north end of the Reigate and Banstead and Mole Valley districts. It runs from Worcester Park and Stoneleigh in the north to Ashted and the borders of Tadworth in the south. I suspect that it must also be one of the greenest constituencies inside the M25, being well endowed with green spaces and parkland—not just the famous Epsom Downs but also Nonsuch park, the site of Henry VIII's palace, which is sadly no more. The constituency is also the site of the Epsom wells, the point of origin of the world-renowned treatment, Epsom Salts.

Epsom has always been an important commercial centre. Today, it is home to some of Britain's most successful companies, such as W. S. Atkins, the engineering consultancy, and Bacon and Woodrow. Indeed, I look forward in two weeks' time to attending the opening of Toyota's new British headquarters.

The real commercial heart of the constituency is not its big businesses but the smaller companies in places such as Ewell, Stoneleigh and Epsom, which are the engine of our local economy. They face real challenges of regulation and doing business in tough climates, and I look forward to being a powerful advocate of their cause in the years ahead.

Interestingly, I am only the second Member of Parliament for Epsom and Ewell since 1918 to take his seat following a general election and not a by-election, which is probably something of a relief to my predecessor, Sir Archie Hamilton. The adage "a hard act to follow" can be a cliché, but in Sir Archie's case it is genuinely true. In more ways than one he is a giant of a man. Members will see that I had to pass a height test in order to represent the constituency.

Sir Archie entered the House in April 1978, and served both his constituency and this House for 23 years. In that time, he managed to strike what I suspect can often be a difficult balance for a politician: to be a successful

constituency MP and to make a real mark on the national stage. I have been very struck since the dissolution of Parliament—and was during the election campaign—by the number of letters that have arrived in the constituency office praising Sir Archie for his work in Epsom and Ewell and thanking him for the help that he has given individual constituents over the years.

On the doorstep I met only too many people who were keen to stop me and say, "Sir Archie has been a great help to us over the years. He has been a real tower of strength in this area." I met many, many people who were genuinely sad about his decision to retire. He will be much missed in Epsom and Ewell, and I face a tough challenge to do as good a job in representing the constituency.

As well as serving his constituents so well, Sir Archie made a distinctive mark on the national stage, in government and in the Chamber. A distinguished member of the last Conservative Government, serving as Minister of State for the Armed Forces, he was a vital part of Baroness Thatcher's team during her years in office. The importance of the role that he played in those years was made very evident last summer, when Lady Thatcher came to Epsom and Ewell to take part in a farewell tribute to Sir Archie. The glowing tributes she paid him on that night spoke clearly of his importance to her Government.

For the past four years, Sir Archie served a new leadership with distinction, as chairman of the Conservative 1922 committee and as an important prop to my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) during an undoubtedly difficult period for our party. Since my arrival, I have been struck by the affection in which Sir Archie was held by his colleagues. Clearly, he is a loss to the House as well as to his constituency. I hope that Members on both sides will join me in wishing him a long and happy retirement.

One of the lighter moments of my campaign occurred when I walked up the driveway of a house in Ewell and saw on its wall one of those tourist plaques that are often seen on the sides of houses in and around London. On it was the inscription:

"On this site, in 1762, nothing happened."

At first, I thought that it was a tribute to the first four years of Labour Government. That inscription certainly does not hold true of the Epsom and Ewell constituency as a whole. We face real challenges in the next few years and I hope and intend to play an important role in meeting those challenges.

First and foremost is the future of Epsom general hospital. Over the past few months, many of us in the area have fought hard to protect the hospital against the local health trust's plans to downgrade it and transfer key facilities to another, already overcrowded hospital 10 miles up the road. Our campaign crossed party divides, brought together organisations and individuals from throughout the constituency and beyond, and won the backing of more than 25,000 people. It is to the local NHS trust's credit that it has recognised the strength of the opposition to its plans and decided to take its plans back to the drawing board. The battle is far from over, however.

It has become only too clear to me that one of the consequences of the reforms and changes currently being made to the NHS is to weaken local services—to centralise at the expense of local people and local

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services. Experience in many parts of the country has shown us that that is a false step. I look to the Government and to NHS authorities to ensure that Epsom general hospital has a secure future, and that the people of my constituency continue to enjoy the services of a strong and effective local hospital.

Our second challenge is the availability of school places in the next few years. As we speak, many parents in my constituency are scared witless about what is to happen to their children this autumn, because places are not available for them. The problem is in part the result of funding cuts made in the past four years, when this country's grant-maintained schools lost funding and the support that they had enjoyed under the previous Conservative Government. In the next few years, between 500 and 1,000 teenagers in my constituency will face the prospect of having no secondary school place. That is clearly intolerable. I shall be beating a path to the Government's door to ensure that a solution is found to the problem—and quickly, because time is not on our side. The parents and children of Epsom and Ewell have the right to expect the secondary school places they need in future.

I will also be pressing the Government on their proposals to reform the planning system. Ashted, which is at the southern end of my constituency, is one of the many communities that have been blighted by the ill thought out Central Railway proposal that threatens to do so much damage in Kent, Surrey, Buckinghamshire and beyond. Do not get me wrong—I do not think that anyone would disagree with the proposition that it is desirable to take freight off the roads and get it on to rail. However, it strikes me as extraordinary that a company can launch a major infrastructure proposal simply by sketching lines on an Ordnance Survey map, not backed up by any detailed engineering drawings, and can then sit back for years doing nothing.

That is the problem facing many of my constituents today: while it prevails, houses cannot be sold, or can be sold only at reduced prices. Ashstead and Leatherhead, on the other side of the M25 in Mole Valley, are two of this country's property black spots in which prices are falling. That cannot be right. The current laws must be changed and I shall look to the Government to address those issues in the current Session of Parliament as part of their proposals on the planning system.

I do not believe that, on his arrival in this place, any Back-Bench Member of Parliament, especially an Opposition Member, can seriously expect to wield much power and influence, but I do believe that we can be powerful advocates for our constituents and constituencies and that by persuasion we can achieve many positive outcomes for them. That is my goal, as I take on the mantle of Sir Archie Hamilton. In the years ahead, I hope and expect to repay the trust that has been placed in me by my constituents, by working tirelessly on their behalf and helping them to solve many of the problems that they face.

6.56 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): I, too, welcome the two new Members of Parliament who have made their maiden speeches today. We have just heard

the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), who made a very good first speech in which he clearly stated how passionate he feels about local issues. I am sure that he will be an asset to the House. When he referred to his predecessor in glowing terms and mentioned the height restriction on the seat, there was some twitching on the Bench in front of him: his hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) will tell him that height and size are not everything. None the less, I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant) made a first-class speech that highlighted his commitment to combating poverty in his locality. I was worried—less for myself than for others—by that part of his speech in which he mentioned the number of Conservative clubs in the Rhondda. It was a good thing that the shadow Chancellor and other Opposition Front Benchers were not around to hear that remark, or they would have been straight out of the Chamber and off to the Rhondda to canvass.

Today, the debate focuses on the economy and trade and industry, and I should like to discuss four issues in connection with those subjects. First, I shall say a word or two about the contents of some of the enterprise legislation that is to be laid before the House. I shall offer a few thoughts, secondly, on the issues affecting the future of manufacturing and, thirdly, on the relationship over the next four or five years between industrial policy and regional policy. Fourthly, I shall comment on the state of public debate on issues of personal taxation.

I welcome the enterprise legislation prefigured in the Queen's Speech. As well as boosting competition and strengthening our competition law, it will begin to destigmatise responsible risk taking by entrepreneurs. I also welcome the proposed legislation to crack down on rogue traders, which is overdue.

The Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths), will remember that in the previous Parliament I introduced a private Member's Bill to crack down on a specific type of rogue trader—those who are half rogue trader and half rogue employer and who continue to rip off thousands of people throughout the country using home working and outworking scams. That Bill had the support of the previous Government and of hon. Members on both sides of the House but, sadly, went the way of many other private Members' Bills as it was blocked by a small group of Opposition Members who evidently felt more strongly about the need to play parliamentary games or people's inalienable right to rip off others in the name of enterprise than about the need to protect the vulnerable. Sadly, the Opposition Front Bench acquiesced in that. I hope that, in this new Parliament, as the Government think about what to include in enterprise legislation, they will consider legislation banning payment upfront for outworking schemes. If they do not include that in the original draft of a Bill, I hope that they will consider including it in an amendment when such a Bill comes before the House.

I should like to turn briefly to issues affecting manufacturing, as I come from a region built on that industry. The nature of manufacturing industry is changing beyond all recognition, but it is still a vital part of the future strength of our economy. Without a firm manufacturing base, the foundations of a strong economy can become extremely shaky. I therefore appreciate the

welcome of my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) for the measures already taken by the Government. Rightly, he made particular reference to the efforts of the Chancellor and his colleagues on regional venture capital funds.

There is no doubt that manufacturing has benefited from the stability that the Government have helped to create, especially the climate of consistently low interest rates, but the sector now faces serious challenges, which cannot be ignored and should not be masked by the overall strength and buoyancy of the economy as a whole. One issue is the persistent question of the level of the pound against the euro, which has been and continues to be a problem. While sudden fluctuations, whether up or down, are not good for anybody, the relationship of our currency to that of our major trading partner, the zone to which we export of our goods, is a serious issue. That relationship, our manufacturing industry and exporters cannot be helped if sterling becomes a kind of hedge currency on the outskirts of the eurozone.

The Chancellor and the Government were right to set clear economic tests both for entry into the euro and a referendum. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil was right to say that careless talk about this or that exchange rate does not help at this time. What happens to the euro and what happens in the eurozone affects us, whether we like it or not. The relationship of our currency to the euro, our ability to get that into a proper form and ultimately, when the economic conditions are right, look positively at joining the euro, remain important to our manufacturing industry.

Mr. Edward Davey: I have a lot of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's remarks. Does he regret a briefing given by Her Majesty's Treasury? When the pressure was, seemingly for the first time for many months, coming off sterling, the Treasury deemed it wise to talk up the value of the pound, thus causing our manufacturing, agriculture and tourism industries even more problems.

Richard Burden: I heard the Government state that they had a clear position, which, in principle, is that we are in favour of joining a successful European currency, but that clear economic tests have to be met. That is a wise and realistic position. Many manufacturers tell me that, over the coming period, we need a continuing debate about the positive advantages of being part of the euro and that we must recognise, as I said earlier, that we are not insulated from what happens to the euro simply by claiming that we can stay outside or by opposing entry. That has not been the case, is not the case and will not be the case.

Mr. Berrow: I applaud the hon. Gentleman's witty and gracious tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), but he has not demonstrated whether or how any economic convergence that is achieved within the eurozone can be regarded as anything more than a meeting of ships that pass in the night. What assessment has he made of the lack of democratic control, on which the treaties proudly insist, in the operation of monetary policy?

Richard Burden: I fully acknowledge that the single currency has constitutional implications. I raised the issue in our debate on the economy and industry sections of the

Queen's Speech precisely because I differ fundamentally from the hon. Gentleman, who seems to think that our trading relationship with Europe, whatever it might be, has something to do with the passing of ships in the night. Our relationship is not like that; the ships are locked together, whether we like it or not. We must accept and act on that.

When addressing the challenges facing manufacturing industry, we need to do more to boost investment, and paying attention to fiscal rules can help us to do so. I welcome moves in the previous Budget to provide further tax credits for research and development and expand the range of tax incentives to foster and promote such work. It is vital to move from consultation to early action, which would certainly be welcomed by manufacturing. It is right that we recognise and meet the environmental challenge and voice our disappointment with policies currently emanating from the United States Administration on meeting that challenge. As a Government, we must look more at the detail of the way in which our own climate change levy has impacted on small manufacturing firms.

The commitment to the climate change levy is, rightly, fiscally neutral, which I welcome, but having talked to manufacturers in my area and other parts of the country I think that there is a need to look at neutrality, not simply between sectors and in the economy as a whole but within sectors. In the past few months, some welcome progress has been made from the motor manufacturing perspective, but more work needs to be done and more attention paid to the problems that might be faced by small manufacturing firms.

The third area that I wish to discuss is the regions. We will not get our industrial policy right or ensure that rising prosperity is spread evenly across our country unless we get regional policy right. People in the regions need far more say about how to map out their economic future and secure and spend the resources to do that. We have faced big industrial challenges in the past few years, some in my own area, and it is no accident that the Government's welcome and important response has been to set up regionally based taskforces that have played and fulfilled a vital role in mapping out responses, bringing together local players and acting as a bridge to government to develop appropriate answers.

The links with the regional development agencies have been important during those crises, but we need to learn the lesson of how the bits fit together and how partnerships, built during problematic times, can be sustained and nurtured, rather than grafted on to what might be most convenient for existing institutions, whether part of local government, Government Departments, local government offices or whatever. It is important that people in the regions understand how, in the development of the regeneration agenda, they and the institutions that they fashion, relate to government. Many good initiatives are emerging, but there is a danger of confusion of the roles of different departments in regional policy; it is important to clarify those relationships.

It is important to allow regional agendas to develop in a way that suits localities and regions. Where area-based regeneration is considered appropriate, the impact on areas not designated for regeneration should be considered as well as that on those that are included. There is a danger of moving towards development schemes that link lines on a map rather than consider the needs of communities. I welcome the Government's commitment

[Richard Burden]

to maximising the regional agenda, but we must avoid the danger of merely linking lines. We must not fall into that trap.

We must not draw false distinctions between economic and social regeneration. Regeneration that does not promote social inclusion will not work. That is why I welcomed the announcement of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget speech that there would be consultation on the introduction of a community reinvestment tax credit. It is important that that process develops in a way that builds relationships between firms and communities. There might need to be some changes to the plans that have been outlined to achieve that, but the principle of a community reinvestment tax credit should be welcomed.

The creative use of tax credits is a means of integrating benefits and taxation and achieving twin advantages. First, there is the advantage of ensuring that work pays. Secondly, the tax system should be allowed to assist those on low and fixed incomes. I look forward to the introduction of a tax credit Bill, which will foster that process.

However, the public debate about the fairest forms of personal taxation to raise revenue has not advanced a great deal. During the election, Conservative candidates used well-worn scare stories, which fell flat. People know that there is a need for investment in public services. They knew that the sums produced by the Conservative party did not add up.

We have demonstrated the importance of tackling the national debt. Getting more people into work is the foundation for funding public services. We were able to give the lie to the old Tory smears on Labour and tax, and the investment that is committed in the comprehensive spending review round is not dependent on tax and other increases.

The time has come to initiate a debate that moves beyond talking about taxation as a swear word. Instead, we should discuss the place that personal taxation should have in the funding of public services. We must also consider the balance between direct and indirect taxation and how the taxation system can best embody the recognition that economic sufficiency and social justice can go hand in hand. We should discuss how our right to have decent public services carries the responsibility of identifying the fairest means for corporate institutions and individuals to fund such services.

There is time for a grown-up debate on taxation that perhaps moves beyond previous strictures. Given the foundation of economic stability that we have laid, now is the time for us to lead that debate.

7.13 pm

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge): This is my maiden speech, and I understand the pride felt by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant) and the honour felt by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling). I understand also the responsibility that lies on those elected to this place. I thank my hon. Friends and other hon. Members for giving me—I am sure that this applies to other new Members—a friendly and warm welcome. We are grateful for the advice that has been proffered on how we should set up constituency offices, for example.

Advice is one thing that we are not short of as new Members. My constituents have offered me quite a good deal of advice, especially on the issues that I should raise in this debate. The first suggestion made to me on 8 June was that we should discuss how to apply the "offside rule". My constituents showed a higher regard for the powers of the House than I felt we had.

I am the second Member to represent the constituency of Teignbridge. The new constituency was formed in 1983 from the old Totnes and Tiverton constituencies. Teignbridge, contrary to what some removal companies might think, is not in the north-east but is in Devon. It lies between Torquay and Exeter and covers about 660 square miles of beautiful rolling Devon countryside. It extends from the granite tors on Dartmoor to the sandy beaches at Teignmouth and Dawlish.

Many right hon. and hon. Members will have travelled through my constituency. They will have taken rail journeys to the far west from Exeter along the Exe estuary. The route turns south as one comes to Dawlish. It runs along the sea front following the sea wall, the sea being on the left; the cliffs, which are red weathered brescia, are on the right. The route continues to the Teign estuary. It is one of the most beautiful sections of railway in the world, and certainly within the United Kingdom.

If people have not heard of the towns that I shall mention, they will probably know of at least one village in Teignbridge, which is Widecombe in the Moor. They will know also of at least one of its reputed residents, Uncle Tom Cobbleigh, and some will have seen the area on television. The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell referred to the famous racecourse in his constituency, but Teignbridge can boast two racecourses—Newton Abbot and Exeter. I am sure that many a punter has sat on a Saturday afternoon waiting for his horse to come last at one of those courses.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) made his maiden speech about four or five years ago, he urged right hon. and hon. Members to visit his constituency and to take a holiday there. That was a good idea. To travel to Torbay, and to constituencies further west, most people have to travel through Teignbridge, where there is much to commend a stay. For those with an historical interest, it is the home of Hornblower—Lord Exmouth, who lived in Teignmouth. It is where Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created "The Hound of the Baskervilles". It is also famous for the man who they could never hang, John "Babbacombe" Lee, who lived in the village of Abbotskerswell.

Right hon. and hon. Members may be interested to know that much of what we can do in this place is due to events in my constituency. After William Prince of Orange landed at Brixham, he quickly beat it out of the Totnes constituency and, I regret, through Torbay to camp his troops on Milber Down before sleeping the night at Forde house, which is now council offices. He entered Newton Abbot the following morning, where I am told that he was first proclaimed monarch. What followed was the glorious revolution.

Teignbridge is a mixed constituency. The moorland areas on Dartmoor have suffered greatly over the past six months and are still suffering from the effects of foot and mouth disease. They suffered from the BSE crisis before that. They will continue to suffer unless the TB problem in cattle is resolved.

There is farming around the Teign valley, which forms a commuter belt to Exeter and contains some of the most beautiful Devon country lanes. There are picture postcard images of thatched cottages with white cob walls.

The rolling hills south of Dartmoor are good beef-rearing country, but they are suffering too. I hope that in the coming months the Government will consider seriously the compensation packages given to farmers and the tourism industry, which is also suffering. I hope that they will ensure that people do not continue to suffer and do not go bankrupt for lack of Government action.

Newton Abbot is at the heart of the constituency. It is a small town of some 20,000 residents, but it is also suffering because of the foot and mouth crisis. It had a weekly market, which is about to resume, but businesses and traders are suffering. As was said earlier, not only the obvious businesses suffer. For example, dry cleaners who do the cleaning for hotels are also affected. I hope that they will be compensated for their losses and that jobs lost in such businesses can be reinstated. I urge the Government to consider the recovery programme that Devon county council has proposed. Hon. Members from both sides of the House have backed that plan, and the Government should support it and the council's ambitions to ensure the economic recovery of the whole of Devon.

Ball clay is one of my constituency's most important exports. At some time, most hon. Members will have sat on products made from ball clay. It is an important mineral resource, which continues to do well. Sadly, the headquarters of WBB, one of the major companies, is in the process of moving out of the constituency and going north. One of my hopes and aims as a Member of Parliament is to encourage businesses to locate their headquarters in the Teignbridge area and in south Devon.

I referred to the two seaside resorts in the south of my constituency. Dawlish is a beautiful seaside town, which is famous for Dawlish Warren, which has a stunning bird sanctuary for any twitchers in the House. Teignmouth is a working seaside town. It has a pier and all the desired attributes of a place by the sea, but it also has a working port. There is therefore a genuine mix of tourism and industry in the same place, which makes it interesting.

My hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) referred in his maiden speech to the occasional difficulties of complimenting predecessors. He said:

"When one has overturned somebody from another party . . . that can be a testing process."—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2001; Vol. 370, c. 103.]

My predecessor was Patrick Nicholls, but I have no difficulty in praising him and his achievements for the constituency. He was a conscientious constituency Member of Parliament, who held regular surgeries and attended to his constituency work diligently. We agreed about several issues. For example, he was a keen campaigner for the reform of legislation on mobile homes. That issue is close to my heart, and I shall try to pursue it in the years ahead.

Patrick Nicholls took up other issues on which we shared views and about which we sent a joint delegation to meet the Minister. That applied especially to shellfish and the way in which the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food interpreted European legislation. We both perceived the insanity of Britain closing shellfish beds for 12 months after failing environmental tests, whereas France and the Netherlands would act after the

failure of one test and reopen the beds for exploitation when the mussels proved safe to eat. We allow people to eat rotten shellfish for three months, and close the beds for 12 months while healthy fish grow large at the bottom of the river. Patrick and I shared the view that something needed to be done.

Sometimes, Patrick surprised me. During the general election campaign, we took part in joint meetings that the churches organised. We were asked about the term "bogus asylum seekers". Patrick roundly condemned the term "bogus", as I do. We had common cause on several other matters in the debates. I am sure that hon. Members from all parties would like to wish him and his wife well in the future.

Teignbridge was unusual in the general election because we had a turnout of 69 per cent. That may sound good when compared with other constituencies, but it was poor because it was 5 per cent. down on the previous election and almost 12 per cent. down on the 1992 election. Villages with a greater population of elderly people had a higher turnout, and it is clear that places with a younger population and perhaps more working-class areas had a lower turnout. People may say that there is nothing new in that, but I am especially worried about young people. Several young people voted with a passionate opposition to the Government's policies, but more could not be bothered and did not vote—they did not see the point.

What do we have to offer young people? That brings me back to the "offside rule". The "offside rule" comment dealt with people's passion for sport, which applies especially to young people. I am passionate about sport, and I am glad that the hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) is present because I enjoyed his speech on the opening day. However, I believe that Sol Campbell will not necessarily go to Barcelona; I hope that he will come to Arsenal. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees that it is difficult to get referees to give away teams an offside decision at Old Trafford.

Young people often have a passion for sport that is not reflected in government—local and national—provision for them. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) has tabled an early-day motion in which he urges the Government to make physical recreation a curricular subject in schools. Physical activity is the best method of helping the health of the nation for the future. We must encourage that not only when young people are at school but after they leave. To do so, we must make sure that the funding is in place and that bureaucracy is cut away so that sports clubs are not messed around for months or years when trying to find premises.

I shall refer to two local clubs in my constituency that experience difficulties. Newton Abbot has a water polo team, which has entered its equivalent of the premier league and will play against the Manchester Uniteds of water polo. Although based in Devon, it must play its home games at Millfield school in Somerset, a drive of an hour and a half. If the local authority is asked to provide a swimming pool of the right size and with the right facilities for water polo, it says that it will not consider the matter, that it may find the capital funding or lottery money, but that it will not do it because of the costs of maintaining and running the pool in future.

The local authority faces difficulties because of the Government's funding constraints. If we are serious about sport and ensuring the provision of sports facilities,

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perhaps the Government should consider ring fencing or providing additional funding so that we have centres of excellence for sport throughout the country.

The River Teign is an estuary in Teignbridge, on which River Teign rowing club is based. It has more than 400 members, many of whom will row past here in the great river rowing race later this year. That club has a problem with bureaucracy and access to funding, which takes time. In the meantime, people are put off the sport. The longer it takes to find facilities, the greater the number of young people who walk the streets and get bored. We want to get people into sports clubs to enjoy the facilities, and fewer bored young people walking the streets at night.

7.30 pm

Mr. Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Richard Younger-Ross) for that intimate portrait of his constituency. I have a previous connection with it, in that I was a member of a book club based in Newton Abbot. I do not know whether it still exists, but perhaps my reading of its books assisted me in my future career. I am sure that I shall follow the hon. Gentleman's parallel career with great interest.

It is a great privilege for me to speak in this debate. In the previous century, hon. Members representing my party never had the opportunity to debate a legislative programme at the start of a full second term in government. The opportunity now afforded to us could shape the future of our country for a generation—a generation that I hope will never have to face the hardships that our parents and their parents had to endure.

I am proud to follow in the footsteps of John Gunnell, who represented the people of Morley, Middleton and Rothwell for nine years. In the last year or so of his membership of the House, his health suffered a debilitating decline and I am sure that all hon. Members will join me in wishing him respite and a full recovery from his illness. Despite his often painful condition, John was still determined to come down to Westminster to perform his duties. He did not always complete the journey and, on a couple of occasions, had to be diverted to hospital.

In that regard, John Gunnell showed the same devotion to duty as another predecessor of mine, Sir Alfred Broughton, whose vote—facilitated by a journey by ambulance—helped to keep an earlier Labour Government in power. Perhaps it was appropriate that John served diligently on the Select Committee on Health. He was not only a patient; he was also very impatient to see the regeneration of the national health service—a cause to which he remains totally committed.

I also want to place on record my appreciation of an early and trusted mentor of my political career, Mary Redpath, who, sadly, died just a week after the general election. Much of what I learned about election campaigning I learned from Mary, and she will be missed by all those who knew her in the Labour party and outside it.

As many hon. Members may know, the constituency known as Morley and Rothwell, which includes the major community of Middleton, straddles the southern boundary

of that great northern city, Leeds. The complexion of the constituency has changed considerably over the past 20 years. It was once dominated by mills and mines, and played a significant part in the industrial revolution. Part of its boundary is formed by the still-functioning Middleton railway, the first commercial railway in the world.

The last mines closed in the 1980s, during that terrible decade of industrial decay. One former mining community is called Lofthouse, whose place name means an upper chamber. If we ever come to consider a new name for the other place once its reform is complete, perhaps we could call that upper Chamber the "Lofthouse of Lords", in memory of the ordinary people who really made this country great.

Some traditional occupations survive, however, and I am pleased to report that from where I live in East Ardsley, I can still see fields full of rhubarb, because we sit on the edge of the great Yorkshire rhubarb-growing triangle. Rhubarb-growing was a flourishing trade in the 19th century, and I am told that today rhubarb is still considered a great delicacy and is served in the best London restaurants. Thankfully, the constituency does not rely entirely on the vagaries of the London restaurant scene to provide high employment, good education and improving health facilities.

Since 1997, unemployment has dropped by 34 per cent., not by chance but by choice in the context of a stable, growing economy. Our primary school results have improved markedly, and we have four new primary schools planned, with building work starting imminently on one of them. One of our high schools, Rodillian school, has just been awarded arts college status. That will bring the extra resources needed to raise standards across the curriculum, which will focus on the performing, visual and media arts.

Bricks and mortar are being laid for the biggest health facility the constituency has seen in 20 years, which is part-funded by Leeds city council and is to be managed by local people serving on the board of the new primary care trust, which I expect will be in place soon. We have approval for the Leeds supertram, which will serve a large part of the constituency and the wider area, with a park-and-ride terminal at Tingley. In Rothwell, where once we had a coal mine, we now have a brand new country park.

Morley, Middleton and Rothwell is deservedly a popular area. That fact brings its fair share of problems, which I am sure will be familiar to many Members. Housing development has placed great pressure on the immediate countryside and the roads are increasingly congested. Even Morley, it seems, now has its own mini-rush hour. However, the problems of affluence sit cheek by jowl with the problems of deprivation. Part of the constituency is classified as being in the top quartile of the indices of multiple deprivation published by the former Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. There is still poor housing; there are still excessively high rates of heart disease; there are still youngsters who turn to drugs; and there is still a fear of crime which no politician inebriated with statistics will eradicate.

In 1997, we were elected to tackle those problems and I think that people have given us credit for the start that we have made. However, to paraphrase one of Morley's

most famous sons, Herbert Asquith, we can no longer say "wait and see", because what we now want is delivery, delivery, and delivery. This has been a theme of the general election and of the debate on the Gracious Speech. It has been said that the low turnout occurred because voters could see no difference between those of us sitting on this side of the Chamber and those on the other. I must say that after only a few days sitting in the Chamber, the difference has been all too plain for me to see and hear.

Perhaps the low turnout happened because electors felt powerless. They have witnessed violent demonstrations on the usually peaceful streets of Gothenburg and elsewhere. Perhaps, we are told, people feel powerless to affect the emerging shape of Europe, or to influence the most powerful nation on earth, where democracy produced an ambiguous result that is nevertheless being taken as a mandate to challenge hard fought-for international agreements on peace and sustainable development. Perhaps people feel powerless to tackle the mysterious forces of global competition, which, unhindered, pick up and deposit wealth wherever the markets choose. "Where", voters might ask, "is our say? Where is our voice to be heard in these markets?"

However, these expressions of powerlessness are nothing compared with what people can experience in their own lives if we do not deliver what they expect. Real powerlessness is to be in pain, waiting too long for a hospital bed. Real powerlessness is hiding at home, fearful of going out or of facing the yobs who will make our lives a misery if we challenge them. Real powerlessness is sitting on a train or waiting on a platform wondering what time we might get home. Most importantly, real powerlessness is not being able to enjoy the basic human right to a decent standard of living, and being excluded both economically and socially from participating in society. We must tackle those basic issues if we are to be judged a success in this second term.

I have referred to the mines that used to exist in my constituency. Most of them suffered from routine disasters that claimed the lives of many miners. When reading the history of those often merciless workplaces, I am struck by the everyday acceptance, in days not that long gone, of death and injury as a routine and unavoidable hazard. But I am also struck by the fact that not every employer of the age necessarily believed that inhumane conditions and appalling privations led to greater productivity.

Increased productivity is indeed one of the pillars of a competitive economy, but to another famous son of Morley, Sir Titus Salt, it was conceivable that workers and their families could be treated humanely, live in decent housing and have their lives to live and that that ideal could be supported by hard-edged commercial logic. In the Victorian age of laissez-faire markets, it was perhaps surprising that businesses could flourish and prosper with such enlightened owners.

To listen to the rhetoric of the global market, one might assume that, if any such businesses were established today, they would fail immediately, their bottom lines burdened with the cost of social cohesion. Is it not ironic that some companies can value good will in millions, but that the good will of the work force and their families rarely gets a mention until it is time to push through their redundancy packages? Therefore, I welcome the commitment in the Gracious Speech

"for an early and comprehensive World Trade Round, which will benefit industrialised and developing countries alike."

We need to co-operate internationally to secure trade that benefits all people and all nations, not just those who have already gained lucrative markets for themselves and positions of dominance that hurt developing countries. We need a trade round that reflects people's aspirations for sustainable development, not the rapacious destruction of the world in which we live. We need a trade round that elevates stability and quality of work to the same rank as the freedom to invest.

We also need international co-operation that functions openly and transparently and in which the democratic forces always lead and can be held accountable. As elected representatives, we face renewed pressure about strengthening our accountability, for that is one way to address the democratic deficit. Throughout the Gracious Speech, there are clear commitments to devolution, to opening up key public institutions and to continuing the reform of our constitutional structures. I welcome all those.

The theme of the Gracious Speech is spelled out in "inclusivity". That word does not trip off the tongue easily, nor have I heard anyone use it in the pub or the supermarket. I am sure that more colourful words could be used to excite interest in the work on which we have embarked, but if we do not succeed, much more colourful language, and worse, will be used to chronicle our failure.

Whether we use the word "inclusive" or not, let us show it in our actions and deliver it in practice. Then, in four or five years, it will be a case not of third term lucky, but third term well deserved.

7.42 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): First, I warmly and sincerely congratulate the hon. Member for Morley and Rothwell (Mr. Challen) on a fine maiden speech that was thoughtful and thought provoking. His confident contribution augers well for the future. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Richard Younger-Ross) on his excellent speech. Those of us who are relative old lags have been fortunate to hear several good maiden speeches today. Perhaps there are more to come; we do not know.

I want to deal with key areas of the Queen's Speech that show a lack of cohesion in the Government's overall economic thinking. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) referred to the need for a firm regional policy, but before considering regional policy, one must examine the public spending allowable under current taxation rates. We as a party will challenge that centre-right thinking of low taxation linked to low public spending.

Last year, for example, public spending was 38.3 per cent. of gross domestic product—the lowest since 1964. Like other parties, we call for a substantial increase in public spending. Otherwise, we will not be able to pay for efficient public services, decent schools and hospitals, safe and efficient public transport and investment in the future of the economy. Day after day over the past five or six weeks, we all heard about those matters from the electors. We need to make progress on them and to reverse current thinking about low tax, low spend. Obviously, we also need a fairer distribution of wealth, which was alluded to eloquently by the hon. Member for Morley and Rothwell.

Over the past 20 years, there has been a substantial shift of resources from Wales to richer parts of the UK. In the first two years under the Government, Wales' GDP

[Mr. Elfyn Llwyd]

unfortunately fell by 3 per cent., compared with the UK average. We want that trend to be reversed and Wales to have its share of general economic growth. Of course, having less inequality in various parts of the UK would benefit the whole economy.

I shall refer briefly to the Barnett formula. We in Wales demand a fairer system to work out the sum of money from the Treasury in London to which Wales is entitled. The current allocation is worked out purely on the basis of population, whereas we need a system that takes into account Wales' greater needs, which are due to such factors as relative poverty and the higher proportion of older and other economically inactive people. In some cases, the sparsity factor plays a part.

We want the Barnett formula to be replaced by a needs-based formula that considers the wider picture of public expenditure in Wales. It would have to include so-called non-identifiable expenditure, such as defence, which equates to £700 per capita in south-west England, but perhaps £100 per capita in Wales. Such expenditure should be described as non-identified, not non-identifiable, because, clearly, projects such as the Jubilee line extension and other large flagship projects are not reflected in any expenditure given to Wales.

We must have a needs-based funding mechanism. Establishing such a formula would be complex, but it is essential and the task should be undertaken by an independent body similar to the Australian Commonwealth Grants Commission. A needs assessment should be carried out to analyse public expenditure requirements across the UK and it should consider the range of major public spending programmes case by case. For example, school expenditure might depend on the number of children of school age, rather than on the total population, and roads expenditure might depend on population density as well as population itself.

The less private spending capacity there is in an area, the more public expenditure it should receive. In the Welsh valleys, there are numerous examples of high sickness rates, low employment and serious poverty. The valleys need more public investment to counteract those obvious and crippling disadvantages.

Labour, and the Chancellor in particular, has made bold claims that there will be no return to boom and bust while it remains in power. Those claims ignore the fact that there has already been a form of boom and bust. For the first two years of Labour's first term, there was bust in the public sector, and its effects are becoming increasingly apparent in the failure to deliver quality public services.

The comprehensive spending review seeks to reverse that trend by increasing public expenditure rapidly in real terms over the next three years. We all hope that there is delivery—I refer to the speech of the hon. Member for Morley and Rothwell—but this boom and bust is curious and such a stop-go approach is hardly conducive to effective and efficient management of the public sector.

As we know, at the end of the three years covered by the CSR, the Government will face the choice of either cutting the rate of increase in public spending or having to increase taxation. That is one reason why Plaid Cymru, the Party of Wales, advocates increasing taxation for those earning more than £50,000 per annum.

There is another way in which Labour's claim to have abolished boom and bust rings hollow. I quote the *Financial Times* of 21 June, which encapsulates the point:

"The minutes of the latest meeting of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee . . . neatly summarise the difficulties. The MPC's is a tale of two economies.

Consumers are feeling prosperous. House prices are rising . . . and retail spending is robust . . .

But boom in the personal sector sits alongside bust in the tradable goods sector. The strength of sterling against the euro is crippling . . . Manufacturing output fell by 0.9 per cent. in April, and the sector is set to fall into recession. Reflecting this, the UK registered its largest ever trade deficit."

Superficially, the Government have enjoyed a good run of economic management in their first term. As Napoleon asked of his generals, "Is he lucky?" We may envy the Chancellor's good fortune, but the Government's second term is likely to be much more difficult and will test their mettle.

The United States is experiencing a major economic slowdown, and Germany is facing a recession. Stock markets around the world are in retreat, and in the United Kingdom the outlook for growth is deteriorating slightly. The Government's spending plans under the comprehensive spending review predicted growth of 2.25 per cent. a year, but even so the public finances will move into deficit in 2002-03. In the past, the Chancellor has relied on actual growth exceeding his projections to ensure that the public finances have a healthier outcome than planned. It is likely that that trick will no longer work, with actual growth being at or lower than planned. The Government will then face having to raise taxes, borrow more or cut public spending, and I hope that it is not cuts in public spending.

Much has been said in the debate about the euro. I appreciate that the debate is not often of a high quality. As always, comments in today's debate have been emotive. I seriously and honestly hope that when the debate begins—it should begin fairly quickly—we all have an informed discussion. I am no expert, nor I suspect are other hon. Members, and we need to be guided by independent analysts, good political thought and economists who understand what it is all about. I hope that we have a mature debate, because it is an extremely important issue.

The economy of many parts of the UK, and certainly of Wales, has suffered from the fact that we are now highly dependent on trade with the countries of the euro zone. Since the euro was introduced in January 1999, there has been a sharp drop in its value against sterling. That has placed a huge burden on manufacturing industry. It has become more difficult to export, and imports from the eurozone have fallen in price because of the rate of sterling. One of the most graphic examples of the impact of the strong pound has been Corus, although I have my doubts about the honesty of that company and whether we know the whole truth even now. The strong pound was cited as one of the problems.

The Government must not procrastinate about entry into the euro, because that is placing at risk manufacturing jobs not just in Wales but throughout the UK. I believe that it will also deter overseas companies from investing in the UK. Major employers, such as Ford, have made it clear that they are continuing to invest in Wales only because they assume that the UK will adopt the euro within the next few years. The signals that have emanated

from the Government and from the Bank of England since the general election are not encouraging, and will do nothing for the confidence of manufacturing industry.

The impact of the euro is not confined to manufacturing. Agriculture and tourism also suffer, and again Wales is particularly vulnerable.

In his Mansion House speech last week, the Chancellor claimed that he favoured a "stable and competitive" currency. At sterling's current level, that is an oxymoron. The Government face a dilemma. It is generally accepted that sterling is overvalued against the euro by approximately 15 per cent. That will need to be remedied before the UK adopts the euro, but if that is done, the drop in sterling's value will lead to additional inflationary pressures. If the Government continue to rely solely on monetary policy to control inflation, interest rates will have to be increased and that will tend to increase the value of sterling against the euro. There will be only two ways out of that dilemma. I shall not go into them now, but there are clearly some important decisions ahead. I am sure that all parties would appreciate an indication from the Government that they are taking the euro debate seriously.

Another matter that has not been taken seriously in the Queen's Speech debate is the crisis in agriculture and in the rural economy. The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor) referred to agriculture, which is another vital part of the Welsh economy. Within the past five years, income for a typical 500-acre farm, often family run, has been cut by well over 70 per cent. Current average income from farming activity in the UK is £4,500. In the past two years, 40,000 jobs have been lost from UK farming, at a rate of 450 a week. In Wales alone, the number of workers on Welsh farms has fallen by 10 per cent. and jobs are being lost at a rate of 73 per week. Those figures were produced before the foot and mouth crisis.

We call for a young entrants scheme to help young people into farming, and an early retirement scheme that is not linked to coupling farms to make them larger. The average age of a Welsh farmer is 58 years, and such a scheme would enable farmers to have a proper, respectable retirement on a reasonable income. We should go to the European Union, because it caters for such schemes. Given the early signals that we had a couple of weeks ago, even though there was no reference to this matter in the Queen's speech, I hope that the Government will take it up urgently.

There is no mention in the Queen's Speech of any direct help for the agriculture sector specifically or the rural economy generally. The Government must realise that the sector is in great peril and deserves urgent and constructive action to avoid the utter devastation of rural communities, not just in farming but in all rural businesses and among rural dwellers who are beset by these awful crises. They will bring with them huge population moves, and will have a great impact on the lives of all rural dwellers, with additional hugely detrimental effects on the Welsh language and culture. Despite there being no reference in the Queen's Speech to that problem or to rural problems generally, I urge the Government to give the sector urgent and high priority over the coming months.

7.57 pm

Dr. Hywel Francis (Aberavon): In rising to make my first speech in the House as the new Member for Aberavon, I am struck by the significance of 7 June. That was the date on which this year the British people for the first time returned a Labour Government for a second term with a substantial majority. They are committed to a programme of social justice, abolishing unemployment, pensioner poverty and child poverty, and achieving an advancement of opportunity for all. The date of 7 June was also the day in 1984 when I was outside the House with tens of thousands of people from mining communities all over Britain, seeking that very same justice. For many Labour Members, there is a certain poetic justice about the date of 7 June.

In paying tribute to my distinguished predecessor, Sir John Morris, who served our constituency for almost 42 years, I am reminded that I am only the fifth Member to represent Aberavon since the constituency was created in 1918. Sir John served Aberavon, Wales and the United Kingdom with great distinction. He had the vision to campaign successfully for greater investment in the steel industry, for better road and sea links through the M4 and our deep water harbour, and for the diversification of the local economy, culminating in the recent development of the Baglan energy park. The arrival of our new regional hospital is also a tribute to his diligent campaigning.

Sir John will also be recognised more widely as both a Welsh and a British statesman. He was latterly the Attorney-General, and in the late 1970s he was the architect of the first attempt at devolution in Wales. It was Sir John who said of our defeat in 1979:

"When you see an elephant on your doorstep, you know it's there."

The Labour Government's achievement of what Sir John called

"the repatriation of democracy to Wales"

owed much to his pioneering work over many decades.

Aberavon is a very special constituency. It has a remarkable history, and because of the talents of all its people it has a bright future. It is the birthplace of Dic Penderyn, the first martyr of the Welsh working class. It is also the birthplace, at Cwmafan, of William Abraham—Mabon—the great champion of the Welsh miners, who was the first Welsh worker to be returned to the House. Aberavon was the constituency to have the distinction of returning the first Labour Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, who remained steadfast to the Labour cause, at least while he was in Aberavon.

The constituency has long been distinguished for its tolerance and for its radical, dissenting, co-operative, community, socialist and internationalist values, which we still proudly embrace today. On Friday, I attended a charity concert for the benefit of children of Chernobyl; on Saturday, in the Upper Afan valley there was a fund-raising event to protest against land mines. Those values are also clearly demonstrated by the success of co-operative enterprises at Glyncoed and Blaengwynfi, which deserve further support. Historically, the internationalist values are perhaps best expressed by the old Independent Labour party centre at Briton Ferry—visited frequently by such remarkable speakers as Emma Goldman, James Maxton and the Afro-Caribbean writer C. L. R. James, who, it is said, completed his masterpiece "Black Jacobins" in our locality.

[Dr. Hywel Francis]

Today the constituency faces great economic, landlordist, educational and environmental challenges. The steel industry at Port Talbot, as elsewhere, has lost many jobs in recent years, but the skills of its work force deserve a long future, and I will campaign for that alongside our local authority, the National Assembly for Wales and the steel unions. We have witnessed an ordered withdrawal of the petrochemical industry—a model of corporate social responsibility—and its replacement by the private-public partnership in the context of the new energy park and the planned urban and sports villages envisaged for Llandarcy.

In my first speech to the House, I want to focus specifically on the citizenship rights of disabled people and their carers in relation to the economy and to the whole of society. Our new Labour Government should and will be measured by the extent to which we tackle, in partnership, the fundamental inequalities faced by disabled people and their carers.

Already in my constituency good progress is being made through the local authority's special needs provision at Briton Ferry and Sandfields schools, the new special needs activity centre for very young children at Taibach, the work of the Shaw trust at Llandarcy—including its disability action centre, which is soon to be officially opened—and the thousands of volunteers often working with disability groups, and networked through the local council for voluntary service.

Government, in Westminster and in the National Assembly for Wales, have demonstrated their serious commitment by setting up the Disability Rights Commission and the recently launched carers strategy in Wales. Three organisations—Mencap, the Down's Syndrome Association and the Carers National Association—recently held awareness-raising weeks. The House would do well to reflect on the vital matters that they raised in relation to employment and wider social issues, and I urge our new Labour Government to listen to their concerns in order to achieve a sense of full citizenship for disabled people and their carers in the new millennium.

Disabled people are twice as likely as others to be out of work. Fewer than one in 10 people with a severe learning disability are in work, and more than 1 million people with disabilities want to work. There is a shortage of at least 40,000 supported employment places. The benefits system is a barrier for many people wanting to work, and most employers have no experience of employing people with a learning disability.

We need an expansion of the access-to-work scheme, offering on-the-job support. We need new rules for the disabled persons tax credit, making work pay for part-time workers, and we need a Government strategy to promote employment of people with a learning disability. We need statutory provision to support carers in the workplace, and young—and not so young—carers who are in education. For all young adults with a learning disability, we need structured programme routes from school and college to the world of work, and we need to involve carers in decision-making bodies.

We need proper and sensitive national consultation with the Benefits Agency, and a new development of the new deal to break down barriers and remove benefit traps for many people with a learning disability who are able to

work and wish to do so. We need a national awareness campaign for employers, aimed at breaking down the obsession with formal qualifications. We need to give priority to those who will never work again, and to their dependants. We need to increase the pace of the settlement of miners' compensation claims, and those of their widows, until it becomes a whirlwind.

The aspirations of disabled people and their carers mirror those of the general population: a good standard of health, educational opportunities that lead to a meaningful occupation in adult life, sufficient income to afford a comfortable standard of living, a safe and secure home environment, a fulfilling family and social life and a valued place in the community. Those are, after all, universal rights, whether they apply to a disabled child in Soweto or to a disabled miner or steelworker in Skewen.

We have a more benign and friendly elephant on our doorstep now—our great Labour majority. Let us use that power wisely and swiftly to achieve social justice—the power which we did not have on 7 June 1984, but which we now have following 7 June 2001.

The Queen's Speech began by referring to our aspiration for a more prosperous and inclusive society. We can do no better than recognise the need to make that essential and courageous journey of hope from social inclusion to social justice, to build a truly inclusive society. The people of Aberavon and the people of Britain expect nothing less.

It was the Chartist poet Ernest Jones who wrote of that fine sense of hope and courage:

"The coming hope—the future day
When wrong to right shall bow,
And but a little courage, man!
To make that future—now!"

8.6 pm

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): I declare again the interests recorded in the most recent Register of Members' Interests.

It is a very pleasant duty to congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Dr. Francis), on behalf of the House, on his maiden speech. He did all the right things: he paid proper and generous tribute to Sir John Morris, who was much liked on both sides of the House and, I am sure, carries the best wishes of all of us in his retirement—if, indeed, he is retiring; he never seemed to retire before.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke eloquently about his constituency, as is right and proper, and spoke particularly eloquently of the interests of both the disabled and those who care for them. We look forward to hearing from him again on that subject, which stood out from a remarkably well thought out and eloquently delivered speech.

The hon. Gentleman produced something of a first: I think that that was the first time I had heard a Labour Member speak highly of Ramsay MacDonald. Perhaps he has now been rehabilitated. Who knows? Perhaps he is becoming new Labour again. I suspect, however, that we may not hear of Ramsay MacDonald again quite so swiftly—although we certainly want to hear from the hon. Member for Aberavon again. I repeat my congratulations on behalf of the House, and, indeed, congratulate all who have delivered maiden speeches so far.

This was a good Queen's Speech. Before I am misquoted, I must add that it was a good Queen's Speech in terms of its intentions. It focused on public service reform and on the quality of life of all the people who send us here. In one sense, of course, that is an admission of failure. The one phrase that was missing from the Chancellor's speech this afternoon, long though it was, was "the last Government"—because he, of course, was Chancellor in the last Government. It was under his chancellorship that productivity stayed flat, that our position and competitiveness declined so markedly, that the poorest 10 per cent.—as he was sharply reminded by one of his own Back Benchers—were falling further and further behind. Above all, it was under this Government that the failure to deliver public services—now the mantra from both sides of the House and from every Tory leadership candidate—became most apparent.

I remember canvassing in Archer way, Swanley, and meeting a lady whose husband had been referred for an important eye consultation. She showed me, in disbelief, a letter from the Dartford and Gravesham NHS trust, telling her that the current ophthalmological wait was 99 weeks. That is not something of which I would have been proud had I been a Minister speaking in today's debate.

I encountered general practitioners—I had never found this in five previous parliamentary elections—who were seriously considering leaving the service altogether. I found schoolteachers who were overwhelmed with bureaucracy—that was the last Government's legacy. It is up to the Minister who is summing up the debate to answer that honestly and properly. Before I get into detail, perhaps I should welcome back to the Department of Trade and Industry, as an Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths)—I never understood why he was dropped in the first place; perhaps he did not. Anyway, it is good to have him back. I hope that he will concentrate all his energies on his responsibilities, which I think include the Small Business Service which does not so far seem to have had much impact.

I want to speak on three points: the enterprise culture that the Chancellor is now promoting, the hospital and school reforms that are at the heart of the Queen's Speech, and some of the difficulties that we have experienced in my constituency with law and order. On enterprise culture, I came here today to praise the Chancellor; I certainly give him five out of 10. At least he has shown in his speech last week and in some of his earlier measures that he understands the problem.

We have had nine years of continuous growth—five under the Conservatives and four under Labour—but productivity has not been rising and we have only slowly become more entrepreneurial as a society. Some of the Chancellor's solutions are clearly right. I welcome the reform and lowering of capital gains tax—it helps to keep serial entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom investing in new businesses, and I applaud the Chancellor for that.

I applaud measures to promote enterprise in schools. The Chancellor must be right to move education business partnerships forward from the old, rather shaky foundation of sponsorship and vouchers into real partnerships where businesses play a part in schools that serve the local community. That is important. I look forward to seeing those ideas fleshed out with some practical proposals to make a reality of those partnerships.

The Chancellor was right to widen the opportunity for share ownership. He has come at that in a rather zigzag fashion, but the extension of the enterprise management incentive scheme is good news. Where I differ from the Chancellor is that he still thinks that enterprise culture can all be done only by or through Government. I have my doubts. Over the past four years, we have seen how too much tax tinkering can frustrate enterprise. Complexity Brown has introduced many different rates of company car tax; he even introduced many different rates of capital gains tax before he started to reform his own reforms. There are new and rather complicated research and development credits. That seems to be getting in the way, rather than reducing the tax burden, simplifying the tax code book and lowering rates.

Alongside much of that fidgeting, the Government have almost unhesitatingly accepted far too much of the Brussels agenda, piling rights upon rights, all of them defensible as individual measures—who could be against more maternity leave, more paternity leave and workers councils? Who could be against any individual part of that agenda? However, the cumulative burden on enterprise is taking this country in exactly the opposite direction to the economies of the United States and far east, which are leaping ahead in productivity and competitiveness.

All those measures—we will see more of them, I suspect, in the next couple of years—distract management from its key job, which is raising productivity and improving competitiveness. They also act as something of a deterrent to small companies. It is the larger companies that have the human resources departments which can hire the lawyers and deal with all the new legislation. It is the small business that is not formed—the self-employed business man or business woman who does not start up—that cannot cope.

Too much Government monopoly, or quasi-monopoly activity, is still getting in the way. Perhaps we did not see it clearly enough then, but it is easier to see now how, for example, British Telecom's dominance of internet access has frustrated new enterprise and new internet services. I support the reforms in competition that the Chancellor is promoting. The more one believes in markets, the more important it is that the regulatory framework for markets is robust and regularly renewed.

On public service reforms, it is all about that magic word "delivery". No speech now is complete without it, but there is, as I said in my question to the Chancellor some four and a half hours ago, some confusion at the top. The Chancellor is still responsible, as I understand it and as he clarified today, for public service agreements negotiated between the Treasury and the spending Departments, but the Deputy Prime Minister in the Cabinet Office is responsible for overall public service delivery, and now we are told that the Office of Public Service Reform will report to the Prime Minister, there is a role for the performance and innovation unit and even a delivery unit—all those central bodies in Whitehall will be chasing each other around and no one Cabinet Minister will have clear responsibility for overall delivery of public services.

It seems that the approach is still top down. There is a reference in the Queen's Speech to more freedom for head teachers, but the Government cannot give more freedom to head teachers if, at the same time, they are demanding from Whitehall more and more targets. They cannot talk about freedom in delivering primary care when they

[Mr. Michael Fallon]

are still overlaying from Whitehall efficiency targets throughout the NHS. They cannot talk about giving police more freedom locally when Whitehall initiatives are laid down by the Home Office. It is all still very top down.

As for the budgets themselves, they have been increased over the past four years and I welcome that, but there is no point keeping on increasing them if they go on being top sliced for Whitehall initiatives and different schemes. That reduces the amount of money available in the front line and demoralises front-line staff. Every Government initiative requires co-ordinators, conferences and area managers and takes people out of the ward, the classroom, the police section. If we are serious about public service reform, we must believe in competition within the public sector—above all, competition in ideas. We must enfranchise police area commanders, head teachers and hospital managers, and set them free to develop their own ideas, rather than rely on ministerial targets and 10-year plans.

We need to be much clearer about the role of the private sector. It seems to be an accepted nostrum among Labour Members—there were a couple of brave exceptions earlier today—that the private sector is good, but I have not yet seen any clear thinking from the Government as to exactly how the role of the private sector is to be developed. If it is to be involved in current expenditure as well as capital expenditure, in managing existing provision rather than establishing new provision, some more thinking is required. Too many of the contracts that are currently available are still controlled and managed by the public sector. Some Labour Members will want precisely that—they want the public sector always to be in control—but the private sector will not necessarily welcome that.

The contracts will have to be longer term than some of the contracts so far and they will certainly have to involve longer leases than have so far been made available, if those same private sector companies are expected to make a considerable capital commitment. We may need to think again about the ability of staff to transfer between the public and private sectors. It is not a question simply of TUPE—the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981. The private sector lives with TUPE all the time: TUPE is a fact of life. However, sometimes, it wants to be able to offer new contracts that may indeed involve higher, if slightly different, conditions and may be framed in slightly different ways.

We need to involve the private sector not simply in running public sector contracts, but much earlier in the design of those services, the design of the delivery and in the process of delivering public services. We need to get the best in innovation, in ideas, in management of design as well as in actual delivery.

I should like, finally, to say a few words about law and order. As I have told the House before, we seem to be much better at law than we are at order. Every year, we have a new police Bill or criminal justice Bill, putting rafts of new regulation and new offences on to the statute book. Returning from our constituencies, however, all of us will recall our constituents' growing refrain about the quality of life that they have to endure—the petty vandalism, the aggressive behaviour in public places and the problems of late-night drinking and drug dealing.

We have to think again about how we can enfranchise local communities and give them more serious powers to deal with matters locally.

I think that both the current Government and the previous one have gone in the other direction, away from local solutions. Smaller police stations, for example, are being closed. Indeed, when Sevenoaks police station is closed, I shall have no police station at all in my constituency. Moreover, our magistracy has been enfeebled and is unable to deliver the type of local sentencing and local policies that their communities might want. Furthermore, our local councils have been emasculated.

Communities need real powers to deal with those problems. I am not at all convinced that some of the solutions that we have offered so far are really working. Antisocial behaviour orders, for example, do not seem to be biting properly. We shall also have to see whether the penalty notices provided for in recent legislation can work properly. We have to look again to see what works, and we need Government to be a little more humble and work with local communities for local solutions.

I tell Ministers to go a little easier on the 10-year plans, the great national schemes, the ministerial targets and the Office of Public Service Reform. Let them look again to local solutions and support different approaches. If Government have a role, it is to clear away some of the practical second and third-order barriers, many of which have been imposed by Parliament itself. Ministers should approach the problems with a little more humility. If they succeed, I shall certainly cheer them on. The past four years, however, are not really an encouragement.

8.22 pm

David Wright (Telford): In my first speech in the House I should like to touch on three themes. I should like, first, to comment on my predecessor in the House; secondly, to speak about the constituency of Telford and its unique position in the history, including economic history, of our nation; and, finally, to look a little to the future.

It is not hard at all to be complimentary about Bruce Grocott, the previous Member for Telford. He served the town as Member for The Wrekin between 1987 and 1997, and then, from 1997 to 2001, after a boundary review, as the Member for Telford. Previously, in the 1970s, he was the Member for Lichfield and Tamworth. In those years he was an excellent parliamentarian, serving his constituents with efficiency, honesty and good humour. It is a testament to him that, whenever I have introduced myself as the new Member for Telford, people have not only commented on my height—indeed I am taller than Bruce—but mentioned their great fondness for him.

Bruce Grocott served the Prime Minister with great loyalty as his Parliamentary Private Secretary. Previously he served Neil Kinnock, and before that the late John Smith. I know that, in the other place, he will continue to serve our country with enthusiasm and his infectious optimism. I am also sure that I speak for hon. Members on both sides of the House when I say that he richly deserves the honour that has been bestowed on him. Having campaigned with him for 15 years, I can say that he is enormously well-respected in Telford. It is very hard to find anyone with a bad word for him. In fact, he has sometimes complained that I have looked too hard for someone with a bad word for him. Nevertheless, I am glad to call him my friend.

As hon. Members know, the constituency of Telford sits in the county of Shropshire and contains most of Telford new town. Although it is a new town, it is largely a mix of older communities—the old districts of The Wrekin, each with its own rich industrial and social heritage. I feel very honoured to be the new Member for Telford because I have lived in the constituency all my life. I think that it is a particularly humbling and moving experience for any Member to be able to say that he represents his home town.

Telford is a creation of the post-war new towns movement. In the post-war era, building on the principles of the garden city movement and the actions of some of the enlightened philanthropists—Titus Salt has already been mentioned today—the then Government sought to build new communities to relieve people of poor housing conditions in the conurbations and tackle the problems presented by the juxtaposition of industrial and living environments. In the late 1960s, Telford was designated as an expansion of the original Dawley new town project. The aim was to revitalise the older communities of Oakengates, St. George's, Dawley and Madeley, where older mining, foundry and engineering industry was falling into decline on the east Shropshire coalfield.

Alongside those communities were created new areas of housing and industry as well as retail and leisure facilities. It has taken more than 30 years for those new communities to gel into the older areas and districts of The Wrekin. I think that I belong to the first generation of people from the area who would describe themselves as Telfordians.

Perhaps the most well-known part of my constituency, however, is the Ironbridge gorge, including Coalbrookdale. It was there, in 1708-09, that Abraham Darby first used coke to smelt iron and signalled the commencement of mass iron production, which was the birth of the industrial revolution. It was people such as Darby and Wilkinson—"The Iron Masters", as they were known—who were the innovators behind the industrial processes of the modern world. In 1779, iron from the Coalbrookdale foundries was used to construct the world's first iron bridge. The area is now of course a world heritage site.

It was, however, not those innovators alone who led the process of industrial change in our nation. That process was led also by ordinary working people who worked in often appalling conditions. It is their contribution to our society that I should like to celebrate today. Indeed, many summaries have been made of what Coalbrookdale looked like in that time of industrial change. It was a living hell, where people lived and died tied to large corporations and gave their lives to drive forward our nation. Far too often in our history, the achievements of ordinary working people are hidden behind the big names. I pay respect today to those hidden heroes of our industrial past.

For many years, the economy of Telford was dominated by big corporations such as the Lillleshall company, with its focus on foundry and engineering work. To be fair to the Lillleshall company, it was often fairly enlightened, building good quality homes for the work force and driving forward a process of change. That process was built upon the non-conformist traditions that Telford has enjoyed over the years. From this industrial landscape grew the co-ordinated organisation of labour in the trade

union movement, a legacy that, I am pleased to be able to say, has lasted beyond the life of some of the old companies that I have mentioned.

Looking to the future, I believe that Telford can continue to be a beacon of innovation and economic growth in the west midlands. During the election campaign, I visited numerous companies that are leading the global field in electronics and computing, automotive component manufacture, plastics, engineering and the banking and service sector. What struck me most during those visits was that the goods and services being offered were often of the highest quality and that in order to compete in the global marketplace, quality is now the key. Being the best in the world is the most important factor for many of our companies.

Large corporations will continue to be important in Telford; that goes largely without saying. However, the future will be increasingly dependent on the success of small businesses and the self-employed; the new innovators of our age. Central to the future also will be the continued creation of real partnerships between employers, employees and the union movement. The best organisations are encouraging this partnership approach, adopting team-focused working and the principles of quality management and allowing people to be innovators at all levels in organisations, not just in senior management positions.

Companies such as Brinton's carpets or Aga Food Services Group in my constituency provide jobs for many of my constituents. They are embracing new working practices, dismantling the old structures and unlocking the potential of their employees in a way that was never done before. If that is done well, it can be done in partnership with the union movement and we can drive forward the productivity of those companies and of our nation.

The products produced by Brinton's and Aga are world class and, importantly, they pay decent wages. For many years, Telford was known as a low-wage location. That is why the minimum wage and the working families tax credit have been so important in my constituency. Thousands of people have found their living standards improved during the last four years. The challenge now will be to provide more jobs in Telford.

I wish to flag up one area of concern: the proliferation of agency work and temporary employment contracts in our economy in Britain today. In many circumstances, such contracts and arrangements are acceptable and give flexibility in the labour market. But too often they are used to circumvent giving people the employment rights that they deserve. We need to consider our approach in this area in much more detail.

During the election campaign, I went to the local constituency jobcentre, where up to two thirds of the vacancies available were for agency-based working. This is a real problem across the country. We need to encourage employers to adopt better working practices and to pay the going rate for the job, while giving people better standards.

The Government are providing the platform for continued economic growth in Telford, and the figures bear that out. Unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 22.6 per cent. since 1997. Youth unemployment has fallen dramatically—by more than 70 per cent.—in a similar period. Nearly 500 young people have benefited from the new deal programme.

[David Wright]

I welcome the principle in the Queen's Speech that economic stability will continue to be the foundation on which increased spending on social infrastructure can be built. I believe that Telford and its people can continue to mirror the achievements of the industrial innovators and the working people of the past. As a local lad, I am proud to represent the constituency; a constituency with such an illustrious past and, I hope, a bright future.

8.33 pm

Iris Robinson (Strangford): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (David Wright) on his maiden speech. Both in content and delivery, he has demonstrated a keen grasp of his subject and has set a high standard for the rest of the new Members to follow. As a fellow member of the new class of 2001, I will watch his progress with interest and, I suspect, envy.

It is an enormous honour for me to become the second Member of Parliament for Strangford since it was created in 1983. Each of us—even the most humble—when first we walk into this House will experience a sense of accomplishment, satisfaction and even pride to be chosen to speak for our constituents.

I feel especially fortunate to represent one of the most scenic and beautiful areas in the kingdom. If anyone doubts my word, I invite them to come and judge for themselves. They should visit the historic Scrabo tower, nestled beside the principle town of Newtownards; see Saintfield, Comber and Carryduff expanding and shaping their future; drive around the coast, stopping, of course, at the picturesque villages of Ballywalter and Ballyhalbert; and sail around Strangford lough, taking in the quaint settlements of Greyabbey, Portaferry and Kirkubbin. They should leave time to walk around the charming fishing village of Portavogie and try those world-famous Portavogie prawns, and if anyone has the energy, they should come to Dundonald leisure park. Almost 10 million people have made it one of the United Kingdom's most visited leisure attractions.

Visitors should cast their eyes over the rolling County Down countryside, the lush green fields, the lough and the coastal views. This is an area untouched by much of the plastic commercialism of the age. It is nature at its best. It is God's own country.

Most of all, visitors should take time to meet the people of Strangford. No friendlier citizens could be found anywhere, and I am delighted to report to this House that Her Majesty will find no more loyal subjects, wherever her writ may run, than the good people of Strangford.

My predecessor, John Taylor, represented this constituency for 18 years. Those who know of the many fierce and bruising battles that we have had will be wondering how I will come to terms with the convention that a new Member, in a maiden speech, should make some complimentary remarks about their predecessor. I cannot deny that Lord Taylor and I have had major political differences. We directly fought two elections against one another in the constituency of Strangford—one for Westminster, the other for the Northern Ireland Assembly. The score is one all and, before he stood down, I had been looking forward to the decider at the recent election.

If there was ever a politician who could treat political triumph and disaster just the same, it was John Taylor. Despite our political differences, I appreciate the personal sacrifice that he made by being involved in politics in Northern Ireland over the last turbulent 30 years. Indeed, when in 1972, the official IRA shot my predecessor, he almost paid the ultimate price for his service to the community.

From being a Minister in the Stormont Government before 1972 through to the present day, John Taylor has been elected to almost every body formed. He has been a district councillor, a Member of the Stormont Parliament, the Northern Ireland Forum, the Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention, three Assemblies, this House, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and now the other place. I am sure that I have left something out but I am equally sure that he will remind me of it. I genuinely wish him well for the future.

Much as I feel a sense of pride at having been elected to this House, I feel an enormous sense of responsibility to those who sent me here. On the doorsteps, it was clear that those who had never before voted for my party or for me were doing so because they felt that they had been betrayed and let down, not just by the Ulster Unionist party but by this Government.

There was no greater sense of betrayal than that voiced by those who serve in the Royal Ulster Constabulary. It is difficult to put into words their feelings of hurt and anger at how they have been treated. For the past 30 years, they have been the last line of defence against terrorism for the entire community. It is impossible to estimate the countless lives saved by the gallantry of the RUC. Its officers can never switch off from the constant and continuing threat to their safety. We cannot calculate the endless hours of worry for the families of those officers during the darkest days of the troubles—the nights when wives watched their husbands leave for duty, fearing that they might never return.

For more than 300 families, their loved ones never did return. Thousands of others returned with injuries from which they would never fully recover. I fear that it will not be so, but I contend that history should record that the officers of the Royal Ulster Constabulary have been the real heroes of the Ulster troubles.

Imagine, then, the ignominy that they faced when they discovered that the so-called peace settlement contained an explicit remit for their destruction and specific rewards for the very terrorists from whom they had been protecting our society. Murderers were released from prison after as little as two years, and they saw terrorists elevated into government and even offered places on the very body that has authority over the police. At the same time, the police force to which they had dedicated their lives was being consigned to the history books on the altar of political expediency. Their name was removed, their uniform changed and even their proud insignia was taken from them. One cannot avoid the conclusion that the RUC has been disgracefully and shabbily treated.

Even now, the Government are engaged in talks that are aimed at satisfying the latest demands of republicans on policing, which will further denigrate the service of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. However, this is not a question only of symbols or titles; it is about effectiveness in the job that the police have to do. Police cuts are taking

place and morale is at an all-time low. It is simply impossible for police in many areas to do their job properly.

Even now, the RUC is still facing attack. Which one of us could possibly envy the job that it has to do, with conflict in areas such as north Belfast, where, night after night, it seeks to preserve life and property? It also faces serious difficulties from terrorists, many of whom have recently been released from prison and are terrorising their communities, creating Mafia-style ghettos, engaging in racketeering, extortion and gangsterism, and running their evil drug empires. This is not the creation of a bright new future; it is the unfolding of a terrifying nightmare.

I have been sent to this House to deliver the message that the present political arrangements do not attract cross-community support. History should have taught us all that, unless both sections of our community support the institutions, the structures will fail. It is not feasible in a divided society such as that of Northern Ireland to govern without consent.

The results of the elections have confirmed that about two thirds of the Unionist community oppose the present arrangements. That is not a matter for debate; it is a matter of record and fact. This reality cannot be spun out of existence or brushed away. It must be faced. The Belfast agreement has at its heart the principle that it can exist only with the support of a majority in both the Unionist and nationalist communities. Now that it has been established that Unionist support is absent, it is the duty of the Government to renegotiate the agreement and to seek support for a way forward that can gain and enjoy the support of both Unionists and nationalists.

This House should be slow to turn its back on the democratically expressed will of the Unionist community. To tell a people that its votes will be ignored and that there is no political way of remedying its concerns is to drive it away from the democratic process, with all the obvious and attendant dangers.

I have represented Strangford in the Northern Ireland Assembly since 1998 and before that in the Northern Ireland Forum. I have always sought to put the interests of my constituents first in all that I do. My door is open to any person of any background. I ask nothing more for the people of Strangford than any other hon. Member would ask for his or her constituents, and I will accept nothing less.

My father came from this city of London, and although he died from war wounds while I was still a very small girl, he inspired me and passed to me his love of our British traditions and way of life. I am not a polished or professional politician. Much of what I have to do in politics does not come easily to me. I was an uncomplicated working-class girl who was driven by circumstances and lifted up by the people in spite of my limitations. I can only hope that down-to-earth loyalty, compassion, honesty and effort can substitute for all else that I lack. There can be few greater honours than to be elected to represent the interests of our constituents. I intend to make their cares my concern, and I am willing to be judged on that basis when the time comes for them to pass their verdict.

8.45 pm

Mr. David Miliband (South Shields): I have listened carefully to the serious and interesting contributions in this debate. I extend my congratulations to hon. Members

who have made excellent maiden speeches. My hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon (Dr. Francis), for Morley and Rothwell (Mr. Challen) and for Telford (David Wright) made powerful and persuasive contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant) showed that, although he may have abandoned the cloth, he has not lost the gift of the preacher. I am grateful for the chance to join them and address the House for the first time.

South Shields is a constituency where unemployment is three times the national average, where the rate of economic inactivity is one of the highest in Britain and where the collapse of the mining and shipbuilding industries has brought massive economic change and wrought real economic pain. It is therefore appropriate that I should make my maiden speech in a debate on economic policy as part of a Queen's Speech that is dedicated to defining and reforming the Government's role in a modern society, for I am here to represent a constituency and to stand up for an ideal—the power of our action together to create a more equal, more productive society.

A maiden speech is a daunting occasion. One of my predecessors, Mr. Cecil Cochrane, waited 12 months before opening his account in the House. He then said:

"I was commissioned . . . to render the Government every possible support during the War, and I am not certain . . . that I have not rendered that support better by keeping silent than I should have done by asking you . . . to notice me before."—[*Official Report*, 22 May 1917; Vol. 93, c. 2205-206.]

I hope that I do not come to regret opening my mouth sooner than Mr. Cochrane, but my commission is to represent the people of South Shields and it is about them and their needs that I want to speak.

First, I pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, David Clark. He spent 22 years working hard for the people of South Shields and had a distinguished ministerial and parliamentary career. He has a permanent memorial of his commitment to the constituency and his passion for the environment in the magnificent leas, now owned by the National Trust, along the South Shields coastline. I am sure that he will make a distinguished contribution to the other place.

South Shields is a town of rich heritage and great diversity. It is known for its river, its mines and the sea. It is also a political town, steadfast in its values, rich in a tradition of radicalism and reform rooted in trade unionism and community organisation. The people of South Shields know the dignity of work, the difficulty of economic change and the difference that an active, enabling Government can make; they know how high quality public services can liberate them as individuals and lift up our entire society; and they know that although there has been progress in the past four years, the work to tackle inequality of life chances is nowhere near done.

South Shields has real strengths. The Port of Tyne Authority has more than 1,000 employees; shipyard and engineering workers have skills and expertise second to none; and there are growing companies in the manufacturing, retail and finance sectors. After four years of fast progress, the performance of our primary schools now outstrips the national average. South Tyneside college is a world leader in marine and nautical studies. Crime in South Shields is falling and housing and social services are improving.

[Mr. David Miliband]

The town boasts more than 200 voluntary organisations, as well as Britain's oldest local daily newspaper, the *Shields Gazette*. South Shields did not just provide the inspiration for Britain's most-read author, Catherine Cookson, but now has a vibrant artistic life centred on the old Customs house. Its coastline is magnificent, its neighbourhoods diverse, and its people warm and hard working.

There is more. South Shields football club is only 12 divisions off the premiership, in the Albany Insurance northern league. For a nervous first-time candidate, the local team provides the perfect answer to the difficult choice between professing allegiance to Newcastle football club or Sunderland football club. In that, as in much else, South Shields has no trouble finding a third way.

South Shields also has a long, proud, multicultural tradition. The town's roots go back to Roman legions and Danish settlers. Our Yemeni community, about 1,000 strong, dates back to the 1890s. The Bangladeshi community, of similar size, now into its third generation, is ready to challenge Birmingham as the curry capital of Britain. Both communities play a vital part in the life of South Shields.

The River Tyne has sent whalers to the Arctic, shipped trains to the Punjab, refuelled Navy destroyers for the fight against fascism and sent the first lifeboats to sea to rescue those in trouble; in return have come goods, ideas, investment and people. Just as the river gives and the river takes, so South Shields depends on what we take from the world and what we can give back. I have special reason to know this.

Over 50 years ago, my distinguished predecessor as Member for South Shields, J. Chuter Ede, was Home Secretary in the 1945 Government—probably the greatest reforming Government in our history. One of his hardest tasks was to make decisions on immigration applications from millions of refugees around Europe. There were many hard cases. One application came from a man who had spent the war here, separated from his wife and daughter who were in occupied Belgium, but with his son, who studied at school and then served in the Royal Navy.

The man who lodged that application was my grandfather, Samuel Miliband. Despite long correspondence, the then Home Secretary felt compelled to deny his application. There could not, he wrote, be exceptions. My father had previously been given leave to stay, and later, I am pleased to say, my grandparents were allowed to join him.

Inclusion and opportunity have been the great motors of progress throughout human history. For me, it is a sign of hope for South Shields, and hope for Britain, that the grandson of a man denied residence in Britain by the then Member for South Shields can, 50 years later, represent South Shields in the House; but my job will not be done until every person in South Shields is able to develop every part of his or her potential to the full.

South Shields is a great town with great people, but they have so much more to give. It is the Government's job to help them all to shine. Unemployment has fallen by more than 1,000 since 1997, but in Rekendyke ward, it is more than 17 per cent.; in Tyne Dock, 11 per cent.;

in Beacon and Bents, 11 per cent. Those figures represent a toll of misery and waste. Some 60 per cent. of young people in South Shields fail to get five good GCSEs—more waste. Long-term illness, often associated with mining, affects one in five households—more pain.

To those who say that economic policy is for middle England and social policy for the Labour heartlands, South Shields replies that a strong economy and a strong society are inseparable and must be built together, with leadership from Government. In South Shields, icy North sea winds lead people to say "cold hands, but warm heart". Today, we need a Government with helping hands and a warm heart.

I am glad to say that the priorities of the Queen's Speech are the priorities of South Shields. In my previous role, I was privileged to play an advisory part in developing the manifesto on which the Labour party was elected to serve a second full term, but I now feel much more privileged to be elected by the people of South Shields to ensure that they receive the full benefit of the policies in that manifesto.

South Shields needs investment in skills, transport and business support to tackle unemployment. We need investment and reform to support our teachers in building up secondary education and to sustain all staff in building up the health service. We need modernisation of the tax and benefit system to tackle child and pensioner poverty. As well as innovative legislation for new ideas, we need effective administration of policies already announced, from expansion of services for under-fives to swift action for miners' compensation.

South Shields has a unique political history. I am the only Member of the House who can say that, since the first Reform Act of 1832, his constituency has never elected a Conservative Member of Parliament. Until the first world war, the Liberal tradition was dominant, but for 70 years, South Shields has been a Labour town. Throughout that period, South Shields has benefited from flashes of Labour radicalism. The Housing (Financial Provisions) Act 1924—known as the Wheatley housing Act—brought council housing. The 1945 Government brought new health facilities. The 1964 Government brought development assistance. The 1974 Government brought child benefit. The 1997 Government enacted the new deal and the minimum wage. Through all that time, however, South Shields suffered because those flashes of radicalism were never consolidated by two consecutive terms of Labour government.

For 70 years, South Shields has felt like a Labour town in a Conservative country. Following the general election, I am glad to say that South Shields feels like a Labour town in a Labour country, making common cause across divides of tradition and geography with people across Britain who share its values and its priorities: public services based on need, active government dedicated to spreading wealth and opportunity, communities built on tolerance and mutual responsibility.

South Shields is bounded by the River Tyne and the North sea, but our town is outward looking. Our community is south Tyneside; our economy is Tyne and Wear and the wider north-east; our commitments and connections stretch across continents.

I chose to stand in South Shields and now South Shields has chosen me. I believe in the potential of inclusion, the power of opportunity and our responsibility to extend it

to all. That is the hope for South Shields. That is the message of the Queen's Speech. That is the cause that I shall stand for every day that the people of South Shields choose to send me to this House.

8.56 pm

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): It is a very great and genuine pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Shields (Mr. Miliband), who gave a powerful, clever, articulate and moving speech. I have been having a bet with my colleagues on the Front Bench that he will be in government within the next two years. I hope that that is not a curse; it is not meant to be. It is meant to be a compliment on the quality of his speech.

The hon. Gentleman's speech was particularly moving for me, because when I first became involved in politics the very first elected office I stood for was Parliament, and in South Shields in 1987. I like to think that the *South Shields Gazette* became known as a Tory rag at that time, because I frequently appeared in it. As a direct consequence, there was the biggest swing in 30 years—from Conservative to Labour. David Clark was elected on an even bigger majority than many in the north-east had expected.

It was a joy to be reminded of all the places that I went to in 1987. The hon. Gentleman referred to the tradition of curry in South Shields. I hope that I will not be accused of being racist, but I recall that Ocean road is filled with curry houses and, with the best possible intentions, is known as Asian road. I still go there; the cuisine is excellent. More importantly, the relationship between all the people in South Shields is excellent too, and perhaps a lesson to those in other parts of northern England where there are so many difficulties at the moment. I truly wish the hon. Gentleman well in what I know will be a long career in the House of Commons.

The Queen's Speech was interesting for its contents and for its omissions. We all expected two subjects to be included—one of which caused me to rebel ever so slightly in the previous Parliament. I was confidently expecting there to be a Bill to outlaw tobacco advertising, which would merely have been a continuation of the Conservative policy of banning it on radio and television. The Bill was not there. Is Bernie Ecclestone the real power behind the Labour throne? The other Bill that we all confidently expected was one to regulate cross-media ownership. That, too, was not included. One wonders what debt of honour the Labour Government owe Rupert Murdoch for ensuring that. Nevertheless, a number of matters were included in the Queen's Speech which I welcomed.

The Prime Minister said during the election campaign—and he was right—that the people of this country are interested in health, education, transport and crime. Indeed, that was echoed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo). It is a source of great mystery to me that we did not fight the election on those issues. Those are the issues on which I, however, chose to fight the election.

Although 70 per cent. of the population hold strong views on the euro and the European Union, the issue is of secondary importance to many people. Although I found my university studies in abnormal psychology far more interesting than those in normal psychology, I remember that in normal psychology the great

psychologist Maslow determined what he described as a hierarchical ladder of needs. It is clear that people are more interested in health, education, transport and crime, and that only when those issues are rectified do they become interested in what they regard as the secondary issue of Europe.

I fought on health: the issues that I fought on in Lichfield could have been fought on throughout the whole country. The Victoria hospital, Lichfield, with which you, Madam Deputy Speaker, are familiar, and the Hammerwich hospital in Burntwood both face closure. It is extraordinary that on 8 June—the day after the general election—South Staffordshire health authority issued its conclusions on the future of community hospitals in South Staffordshire, in which it announced those closures so as to save £1 million. You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I raised that issue in the House month after month. When I raised it with the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health, they said—perhaps understandably—that they could not comment on leaked documents that had not yet been published. Was it not cynical of the authority to issue the document the day after the election?

Those are the very matters mentioned in the Queen's Speech. The Queen's Speech contained a commitment to improve health services in the United Kingdom. I urge Ministers to bear it in mind that health services in the United Kingdom encompass more than primary care and the great specialist centres, such as the traumatic injuries unit at the North Staffordshire hospital, Stoke-on-Trent; they also include the community hospitals that are found in all our constituencies.

I also fought on the subject of education. People out there feel that there is no difference between Labour and the Conservatives—that both parties are heading in the same direction. Today, Alastair Campbell had to announce that there is no great fight between the people—*[Interruption.]* I do not know why the Government Whip is gesticulating at me, but I am sure that it is not very interesting.

Education is tremendously important to most Members of Parliament and to our constituents. I am delighted that the Government are beginning to fund ever more centrally, direct from the Treasury. That is important, especially in areas such as mine. Staffordshire is second from the bottom of the table of shire counties in allocation of funding under the standard spending assessment mechanism. Such disparities put children in Staffordshire and other parts of the United Kingdom at a disadvantage. I praise the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), who is not present, for leading a group of 40 constituencies—located throughout the United Kingdom but especially in England and Wales—that feel that they are underfunded.

Such underfunding is wrong and historical, but Labour owes a debt to the British people. In 1997, the party promised that the problem would be rectified within one year. The Prime Minister said that 2000 would be the year of delivery, but it was not. Perhaps this Parliament will witness the year of delivery. I hope that it will, for the sake of the people who use hospitals in my constituency and the children who go to school in my constituency.

The other issue on which I fought the election was crime. Last year, violent crime in Staffordshire rose by 43 per cent; it rose by a further 23 per cent. this year. One of the main reasons for that rise was the lack of policing.

[Michael Fabricant]

Two hundred and forty police officers have been withdrawn from the Staffordshire police force in the four years of the Government's stewardship of our police forces. That is wrong; there is a direct correlation between the number of police officers on the beat and crimes committed on our streets. I hope that the new Home Secretary will be given the financial wherewithal to ensure that something is done about that. Simply having new recruits is not enough; we need police officers with experience as well.

May I suggest to the Treasury that one way of saving money is to keep police officers beyond the age of 55? If they have the skills and are fit, perhaps they should be retained by the police force. Showing my age, I well recall "Dixon of Dock Green". At one point, Jack Warner, who was crippled with arthritis, was being wheeled about behind the desk in Dock Green police station. However, there are many fit people of sixty and over who could be retained by the police force and do good police work. It is wrong that 240 police officers from Staffordshire have been withdrawn; as I said, that consequently led to a rise in crime in our area.

There has been considerable mention of the debate on the euro. After all, our debate today is concentrating mainly on Treasury and Department of Trade and Industry matters. One reason why I fought the election on health, education, crime and transport, is that we have paid many taxes yet not seen delivery. If the stealth taxes that we have paid had been put on income tax, they would have raised it by the equivalent of 9.8p. That gives an idea of the huge increase in taxation that we have suffered, yet we have not enjoyed a concomitant growth in services.

Will the euro be the great panacea? I think not; the Chancellor is right to show caution. While the euro will provide the advantage of fixed currency exchange rates between countries in the eurozone, it will also magnify any preponderance towards boom and bust. The Chancellor is as aware as I am that the economic cycle in continental Europe is nothing like that of the United Kingdom or the United States of America. There are huge structural reasons for that. We—not the Japanese—are the largest investors in the USA and vice versa, so there are huge fund flows linking us to the USA. In the United Kingdom, just as in the USA and Canada, people have long-term mortgages. However, people who own their own homes in continental Europe are a minority and tend to do so because they have inherited them. Most people rent their homes; they do not have long-term debt. Given the damping effect arising from that, and for many other different reasons, we are not in synchronisation with continental Europe.

The Chancellor is therefore right to show caution: he knows as well as I do that if we were in the eurozone and there were a boom in continental Europe, but a bust in the UK, interest rates would rise in Europe, which would make our recession even deeper. Similarly, when Britain is doing well—as we are at the moment because the USA has been doing well, although other speakers have pointed out that we must show great caution about that country, which is already beginning to slow up—and Europe is doing badly, the last thing we want is lower interest rates, which would simply fuel inflation.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer is right to say time and again that if we reach synchronicity with continental Europe, that must be sustained. It—[*interruption.*] I do not know whether the Economic Secretary to the Treasury is disagreeing. Is there a split already on the Government Front Bench? I am quoting what the Chancellor has said, and he is right. There is no point in having synchronicity for only a short time. Just as two roads approach each other and pass at crossroads, there will be great dangers to business in the United Kingdom, and to the United Kingdom at large, if we enter the euro and are not in sustained synchronicity.

I can see there being sustained synchronicity only if we do not invest in the United States and it does not invest in us. That would be dangerous for employment. There will be dangers also if we decide that we shall not encourage people to own their homes. That would be wrong, too. One of the good things about the Government is that they have embraced what the Conservative party has long believed in, namely, the advantages of home ownership.

I should like the Treasury to be more transparent. In the 1980s, I worked in broadcasting. I used to travel three or four times a year to the Soviet Union. I was there when Mikhail Gorbachev was in power, and he talked about glasnost, or openness. I wish there were more openness about the five tests on entering the euro and about our position on membership of the European Union.

The Prime Minister has said repeatedly that it is right that we should stay in the EU, because it saves 3 million jobs. He may be right. Others have said, including the United States Government, that being in the EU is costing us 100,000 jobs and that if we were outside it we would, within four years, overtake Germany and become the third largest economy in the world. The US Government have produced a large document that they believe proves that fact. I do not know whether it is accurate. Perhaps the Americans are right or perhaps the Prime Minister is right.

I do know, however, that the Treasury has not produced any such document. I am not advocating leaving the EU, but I advocate an open investigation into whether the EU is benefiting the United Kingdom. What are we frightened of? Are we frightened of knowledge? Is it that the Treasury fears—it is the Treasury that will have to do the work—that if we quantify the costs of our membership of the EU and quantify all the undoubted benefits of our membership, the costs will outweigh the benefits? It they do, that is worrying.

If the Treasury is confident, as so many others are, that we are gaining from membership of the EU, it should produce the work to demonstrate that the benefits far outweigh the costs. We need some glasnost in this Parliament too.

The debate will be summed up by the new Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. I welcome the right hon. Lady to her position; I am glad that she is listening to the debate. She will be aware that about £10 billion has been added to the costs of British business. That was the calculation of the British chambers of commerce and trade. She is aware also—she was in her place when I intervened on the Chancellor earlier—that over the past four years the UK has dropped from ninth to 19th place in the international competitiveness league. That is worrying. It has resulted in firms such as Corus axing jobs in Britain when it has not axed jobs elsewhere in the EU.

It has resulted in Motorola closing factories in Scotland when it has kept open factories in Germany, which have high wage costs. One must ask the question: four years ago, when we were ninth in the league, would the British factories have been closing and the German factories staying open? Whether we are in ninth or 19th place seems an academic discussion, but it affects jobs and people's lives.

The Prime Minister said that 2000 would be the year of delivery. It was not. When he returned to 10 Downing street after the general election, he suggested on the doorstep that he knew only too well that it was the last chance for Labour to deliver. For the sake of the nation, I hope that the Labour party finally delivers.

9.15 pm

Ian Lucas (Wrexham): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate and to record my pleasure at the contents of the Gracious Speech. It is an especial pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant). Lichfield is a beautiful cathedral city, which I know well and visit often to meet close personal friends.

I am also pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mr. Miliband) because I was born in Gateshead in south Tyneside. I owe a great deal to that town and community, which reminds me of the community that I am now proud to represent: Wrexham.

Labour has delivered for Wrexham, which has progressed greatly in the past few years. In preparing my speech, I was interested to read the maiden speech that my predecessor, Dr. John Marek, made in 1983. He said that unemployment in Wrexham stood at 20 per cent. The town was in the middle of momentous change. The coal and iron industries—the rock on which the community was built—were about to be fatally undermined by a callous and short-sighted economic policy. In 1983, my predecessor remarked that the people of Wrexham wanted to work but that no work was to be found.

Much anxiety has been expressed about the low turnout at the general election. It has been said that voters believed that Governments are all the same and that politics does not affect people's lives. I disagree. The people of Wrexham have now been given the chance to get on; previous Governments did not give them that chance. Governments change lives, for good or ill. Politicians must not hesitate to make that point and urge our electors to remember how things were and how they have changed through Government action.

The events of the past four years show that when a Government build the right foundations, Wrexham people are ready to seize new opportunities and compete in a changing world. Unemployment was 20 per cent. in Wrexham in 1983; it was 3.3 per cent. in May 2001. That is testament to the people of the town, who have shown themselves ready and willing to adapt, learn and work in a transformed economy, and to a Government who have created a stable economy in which business and industry can thrive.

As someone who has run a small business, I know the importance of stability, low interest rates and the ability to plan ahead. I also know, however, that the biggest asset of any business or town is its people. That is where Wrexham shows its mettle. The town has a strong civic

pride. It has the qualities of a Labour town: it is resilient, welcoming and open. It demands fairness and it wants the chance to get on.

My first constituency engagement after my election was a community litter pick, which was enjoyable. It introduced me to an interesting lady who was well over 70. She spoke not with a Wrexham accent, but a southern African accent. While picking litter with her, we chatted about the length of time she had been in Wrexham. She said that she had been there for four months, and that she was there with her daughter and her granddaughter, who was four years old. She said that they had arrived in Britain from Zimbabwe four months earlier with seven suitcases. Their farm there had been taken away from them. They had arrived back in Britain and come to Wrexham because her late husband had fought in the battle of Britain and had had a friend who lived in the town.

As a result of that connection, the British Legion in Wrexham welcomed this lady. The local authority found a flat for her in the town and the British Legion decorated and furnished it. That is how Wrexham treated one asylum seeker. That shows what Wrexham is like to the outside world, and it shows the strength of its community.

Wrexham knows, however, that, in the modern world, it must continue to progress and to change. It knows that skills development and a willingness to learn hold the key to more prosperity. Colleges in the town are now working with industry to develop the work force Wrexham needs to attract the best industries and build further prosperity, because people there understand that prosperity is the key to attacking the problems of poverty and drug-related crime that still exist in the community.

I worked with teenage drug addicts, as a lawyer representing them. I remember one 14-year-old who had committed 23 house burglaries to feed a heroin habit. I also remember the face of his mother who always came with him to court. Crime has many victims in many different guises. I welcome the work carried out in towns such as Wrexham to help those victims, and I welcome the measures in the Queen's Speech to make those who profit from their misery pay proper penalties.

The work of my predecessor, Dr. John Marek, has played an important part in dealing with constituency problems in Wrexham for the past 18 years. This was very evident to me as I knocked on doors in the town. I heard from many people about his diligence and about the work that he had carried out on their behalf. I can best pay tribute to him by striving to uphold the same standards.

I would like to end on a personal note. I sought election to this House because I believe that it can change our country for the better. I hope that I have the skills to contribute to bring about that change. If I have, it is because I have benefited from those who have taught me and argued with me over the years. I thank them; they know who they are. But above all, I wish to thank my parents, who have supported me and given me the chance to get on. For me, being a Labour Member of Parliament is about striving to give all people the chances that I have had.

9.23 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian Lucas). His maiden speech, which was moving and

[Mr. Edward Davey]

passionate, shows that he will make many good contributions to debates in the House. Many of us remember his predecessor, Dr. Marek, and I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to John, who had many friends across the Floor.

In the short time remaining to me, I would like to focus on the economy. I am concerned about some of the contributions that I have heard tonight, and about some of the ways in which the economy was debated during the election. There is too much complacency about the UK economy. People seem to forget that the problems in the international economy, particularly in the United States, but also in Japan and Germany—the world's three largest economies—will inevitably impact on the UK economy. The UK economy is not as well placed to meet those challenges as is often made out.

There are huge imbalances in the UK economy between consumption and manufacturing output, between the service sector and the manufacturing sector and between different regions. A slowdown is already taking place in our economy. The monetary data, the manufacturing output data and the gross domestic product growth data show that. We have a weakening economy that is not well placed to meet the challenges, particularly in the light of the present uncompetitive exchange rate.

I am concerned that, even in these early days, the new Government have made exactly the wrong decisions and the wrong noises to meet that challenge. In interventions made many hours ago, I questioned Labour Members about whether the remarks from Her Majesty's Treasury, talking up the pound when it was falling towards a more competitive level, were sensible: answer came there none.

I am worried for those working in the manufacturing, agriculture and tourism sectors in particular. They face problems because of the uncompetitiveness of the pound, but the Government's first words, albeit sotto voce in briefings to the press, undermined the markets' reaction to the pound, which was easing the pressure on those industries.

I hope that the Government will change their mind about the way in which they brief the press and realise that they must support the Monetary Policy Committee to achieve a rebalance in monetary policy. That is crucial for those sectors of our economy that are under pressure.

I return to a matter that is not directly referred to in the Queen's Speech, but which was mentioned in briefings related to it and in speeches made today—the Chancellor's proposal that the economic theme for this Parliament will be competition and productivity. He made welcome announcements about how policy will change in the Department of Trade and Industry and the Treasury in order to promote competition and, thus, improve productivity.

We welcome many measures in the package, but three omissions represent a real problem and the Government must focus on them if they are to reach their productivity goals. The first is education. Investment in education is the key to improving productivity and making our nation competitive, but it was not the centrepiece of the Chancellor's announcement. Secondly, the need to simplify regulation and the taxation system is also important, and the hon. Member for Sevenoaks

(Mr. Fallon) made the same comment in his excellent speech. In this Parliament, we need a major change in the Treasury's attitude to the taxation system.

The third omission is a debate about Britain joining the euro. If there is one measure that would change the way in which British industry and the British economy had to face up to competitive pressures in the world and promote its own productivity, it is joining the euro.

Countries in euroland are already achieving a massive improvement in their competitive position. Although that is yet to come through to the macro data, there is huge and unprecedented merger activity in euroland, which is sowing the seeds for a competitive rejuvenation of those countries that are members of the euro. The economic rationale is price transparency and the competitive pressures that that unleashes, but if Britain is on the sidelines we shall not receive the micro-economic benefits that are the foundations for macro-economic success. The Government are determined to make this Parliament the one in which British productivity picks up, but they are making serious errors on core aspects of the policy changes necessary to achieve that.

I return to how the House debates and holds the Government to account on economic policy and shall introduce the debate on the euro in my remarks. Often, we are lectured by Eurosceptics in the House that joining the euro would undermine parliamentary sovereignty and that, somehow, monetary policy being decided by the European central bank would completely change the historical position of this place. That argument is nonsense on stilts, as any analysis of UK monetary policy over the decades would reveal.

There has never been a vote in the House on interest rates or the exchange rate. As the minutes of the MPC show clearly, day-to-day setting of monetary policy is very technical, and the House is not equipped to hold the Government properly to account in such a way. Moreover, the international capital markets hold all Governments to account for their monetary policy and how it is implemented. The gnomes of Zurich and the red braces wearers in the City hold the Government to account on monetary policy, not the House. However, the House should hold the Government to account on fiscal policy, but it has failed to do so for decades.

The last time the House voted against a spending request from the Executive was in 1919—it was for a second bathroom for the then Lord Chancellor. I referred to that anecdote several times in the previous Parliament, and I shall come back to it. If hon. Members are interested, they can read my booklet called "Making MPs Work for our Money". I am not trying to get commission, because it is available free on my website—www.edwarddavey.co.uk. It can be downloaded free of charge, and I recommend it to new Members. In that paper, I have tried to set out how the House could reform itself to ensure that it holds the Government properly to account for fiscal policy. That requires radical changes.

In its various reports during the previous Parliament, the Select Committee on Liaison nudged the House in that direction. I ask new Members to read its report and join in the historical mission for this Parliament to reform the way in which we hold the Government to account for economic policy.

9.31 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): I wish to declare the interest recorded in the House of Commons Register of Members' Interests, which may be appropriate to the debate.

It is my great pleasure to congratulate hon. Members who have made maiden speeches this evening. They have been of a consistently high standard. I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling). All hon. Members who made maiden speeches showed great knowledge of, and affection for, their constituencies, which is an important feature of our parliamentary system, with its single member constituencies. All of them will be a great credit to the House in the years ahead and in the debates that we shall have with them.

I also congratulate the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on her well-deserved promotion, and her ever-growing army of junior Ministers. There are eight now, which must almost be a record. They will not take up the Front Bench entirely, because two of them are from the upper House. Nevertheless, they are collectively a formidable team, and we look forward to debating contentious and other issues with them.

A heavy responsibility lies with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and her colleagues. Her Department looks like taking on the role of balancing the expenditure ambitions of other Departments. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that this Parliament will be dominated by public expenditure issues in respect of public services. That may be right and proper, but if public spending is to be the chief issue, it is important for the Department of Trade and Industry to ensure that that is balanced by an equal attention to the wealth-creating process. It is only from the taxes paid by businesses and their employees that we have any public services. Quite simply, without profits and tax there can be no welfare. All Governments must bear that eternal truth in mind.

We shall support the right hon. Lady and the Department in so far as they act to promote the success and enterprise of the economy. However, the signs so far are mixed and not altogether encouraging. The Chancellor gave his own version of the Queen's Speech. There was a time when Her Majesty laid out the Government's programme, but now that task is shared with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The Chancellor showed that he may have learned something from his mistakes, and we shall support elements of the enterprise and competitiveness package in so far as they do the trick; but in other respects there was more familiar meddling from the Chancellor and the Treasury.

What was noticeable, I am afraid, was that the Department of Trade and Industry had again been reduced to playing second fiddle. It essentially had a walk-on part in the drawing up and promotion of that package. That was a persistent problem in the last Parliament. The DTI, under a succession of Secretaries of State, was unable or unwilling to stand up to the Treasury. That is why we had damaging and unnecessary taxes, such as the climate change levy, which is incredibly complex and utterly irrelevant to the task of combating global warming. It is why we had record fuel duties and why the whole British haulage industry was made uncompetitive. The DTI apparently did absolutely nothing to resist the Treasury's taxing ambitions in that respect. That is not to mention

IR35, the notorious tax change that has done, and continues to do, so much damage to the information technology sector.

My friendly advice to the Secretary of State is that the DTI should have its own enterprise and growth package on its own terms, and that the Treasury should come in behind that. The package should include the opening issues on which mistakes were made in the last Parliament—and there is plenty of evidence of those mistakes. Today's debate has reminded us that since 1997 we have fallen from ninth to 19th place in the world competitiveness league, and that the productivity gap to which the Chancellor is fond of referring has, in fact, widened. That was not apparent from his speech, and it is certainly not apparent from any Treasury document; but a careful reading of the DTI annual report published in March reveals that, on the basis of both calculations of productivity—output per worker and output per hour—the gap has widened since 1997, in relation not just to the United States but to France and Germany.

Every Budget that we had in the last Parliament referred to productivity and the productivity gap, but the gap has widened rather than narrowed. Why should we believe the Government's new emphasis on productivity, and why should we think that it will be any more successful than what happened last time—especially when many of the same mistakes are being repeated?

For instance, within days of the general election the Government admitted that they had given in to the European Union over the information and consultation directive. It is precisely that sort of centralised, standardised, legalistic interference from firms and business that is so damaging, and has caused so many problems over the past four years. It has led to the persistent over-regulation described by my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon). I do not refer just to the individual items; this is a cumulative burden that adds to business costs and loses us competitiveness in world markets.

Of course, the Government opposed that directive. The last Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said in the House on 18 January:

"The Government remain opposed to the directive".—[Official Report, 18 January 2001; Vol. 361, c.498.]

Another DTI Minister, the Minister for Employment and the Regions, who is present, was also against the directive. He said:

"We want a dialogue based on trust and partnership, not legal obligations."

I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman is still of that opinion. He certainly lost the argument in Europe.

That is one more decision that would once have been made in the House of Commons by the Government. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) said that there was no democratic transfer in these matters. The decision on that proposal, which would have been made in the House by a Government, has now been transferred to the European Union and made on the basis of majority voting. Of course, that will increase: the Nice treaty extends majority voting. That has been spotted by the Irish. The Nice treaty is not primarily about enlargement. If it were, the budget and the common agricultural policy would have been tackled. The Irish spotted that it was about further centralisation. Therefore the warnings of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East

[Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory]

(Sir T. Taylor) are valid. Even before the Nice treaty has come into effect, a consultation directive opposed by a Labour Government has been decided by the institutions of the European Union. That is why not just this country but the European Union as a whole is losing its way in global markets.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I will not give way, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, because I wish to pick up on some other points from the debate.

One of the puzzles about the whole debate is why it is that the Chancellor and other Ministers talk glowingly about the United States success in enterprise and venture capital, yet converge on a different economic model promoted by the European Union. It is true that the Government have picked out items from the American experience, such as the proposal to apply criminal sanctions against business people guilty of anti-competitive behaviour, but, if they want to pick out certain items such as that, why do they not buy the full American package and realise that American entrepreneurial success is built on low regulation and low business taxation?

In short, the Government are in a muddle. That is dangerous when we consider how vulnerable the British economy is. We have a highly distorted economic backdrop. There is something approaching a boom in services, bank lending to the private sector is at near record levels, but the trading sector, particularly the manufacturing sector, is almost in recession. Competitiveness and productivity are down; we are running a record trade deficit; the savings ratio has collapsed; and our enormous public expenditure commitments go far beyond any anticipated growth in the economy. That is why we shall look critically at the enterprise Bill. We shall be constructive on bits of it that we approve of, but shall look critically at it to find out whether it will strengthen the sinews of the economy to see us through any economic downturn.

Perhaps when the Secretary of State replies, she could kindly answer one or two additional questions. Is she serious about the need to remove excessive regulation, which is an unnecessary burden to growth? It was in that area that the biggest gap opened between words and deeds in the previous Parliament.

On the euro, my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) urged caution on the Government. In anticipating his words, the Government have already responded by telling others, "Cool it on the euro." If the Government are cooling it on the euro, should firms and businesses cool it on their conversion to the euro? In the previous Parliament, the Government urged businesses to use their own money to prepare to convert to the euro. If the Government are going cool on the whole project, is their message and instruction to firms to back pedal on the anticipated conversion costs? Can the Secretary of State confirm the £32 billion figure, which will be the cost to business on conversion? The Chancellor rubbished that figure from an authoritative source during the election. Have the Government a superior one?

My last specific question is on energy policy. The Government and, indeed, Europe as a whole have a hypocritical policy towards the United States. They

criticise the American presidency for renouncing the Kyoto accord, but meanwhile Europe as a whole has no long-term or even medium-term strategy to counter the increase in carbon dioxide emissions. With the decommissioning of nuclear power stations in the medium term, it is not only an opinion or a possibility but a certainty that our carbon dioxide emissions will increase. Why is Europe lecturing the United States about global warming when Europe collectively has no answer to the problem after 2010? Will the Secretary of State confirm that there is to be a comprehensive review of energy policy that will get to the bottom of that issue?

Opposition Members will enter into the debate on public services with gusto. We agree that, as a country, we must be far more creative—this applies right across the political spectrum—about how to mobilise the means to supply the health, education and other requirements of the population. We shall tackle that subject with the same vigour with which we tackled the industrial and economic problems of the 1980s and 1990s. [Interruption.] Let us not forget—[Interruption.]

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) should not shout across the Chamber.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am grateful to you, Mr. Speaker.

I ask the House not to forget, and to balance those ambitions for public expenditure with the knowledge that all those plans depend on the health and success of the productive sector of the economy. It is that task that the Government must tackle more energetically in this Parliament than they did in the previous one. If they do so, they will have the support of Conservative Members. If they do not, the disillusionment shown by the scandalously low turnout in the general election will become terminal.

9.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Ms Patricia Hewitt): We have had a wide-ranging and constructive debate that has been particularly remarkable for the number and the quality of maiden speakers. I must apologise to right. hon. and hon. Members for the fact that my unavoidable commitments elsewhere prevented me from hearing so many of those speeches in person, but I look forward to reading them tomorrow with pleasure and with profit.

All of the hon. Members who made their maiden speeches today paid eloquent tribute to their predecessors, many of whom served in the House for many years. All of them also gave the House vivid descriptions of their own constituencies. In a thoughtful and wide-ranging speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Bryant) reminded us that he is one of the very few hon. Members whose way into the House was paved by a special new Act of Parliament.

The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) spoke about local problems and the local public services that have so dominated the recent general election.

In a witty speech—we look forward to further speeches from him—the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Richard Younger-Ross) spoke particularly about the need for more

businesses to move into south Devon, which is a central preoccupation of the regional development agency in that area, as is the case elsewhere.

In very well-informed and wide-ranging speeches, my hon. Friends the Members for Morley and Rothwell (Mr. Challen), for Aberavon (Dr. Francis) and for Telford (David Wright) all spoke about the impact of the extraordinary technological changes taking place in our economy on the industrial structure and on employment in their constituencies. They reminded us of the central importance of ensuring opportunities for every individual, regardless of background, to find and fulfil their potential not only for their own sake and that of their families and communities but for the sake of our wider economy. Opportunity for all as a route both to a dynamic economy and to a more inclusive and fair society is a central theme in the Queen's Speech.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Iris Robinson) brings to the House her experience in the Northern Ireland Assembly. She paid generous tribute to her predecessor, against whom she reminded us she has stood in various elections.

I particularly want to refer to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mr. Miliband), with whom I worked so many years ago on the Commission on Social Justice. He, too, stressed—and vividly illustrated with examples from his constituency—that in the modern world, a dynamic economy and a fair society are not enemies but partners.

In a moving and personal speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian Lucas) also stressed the waste of so much talent in our community and, again, the importance of extending opportunities to every individual. All of those who spoke will make a distinctive and valuable contribution to this House and I look forward very much to hearing from them on future occasions.

Before I turn in particular to the contribution of the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), I must refer to the position of one of the United Kingdom's oldest companies, a matter that I know is of great concern to Members on both sides of the House. I am referring to one of Britain's oldest and most famous brands. Unfortunately, the company's product line is stuck in the 1980s, its consumers are ageing, its share price is falling, its boardroom is split and its chief executive has just resigned: the Conservatives plc now has to find itself a new leader.

Does the party turn to the chairman of the divided board, an aristocratic but perhaps weary potential candidate? Or does the party put its hopes in a Spanish takeover bid? That is the choice that faces the Conservatives plc. Will it be the toffs, or will it be the tapas? We look forward with great anticipation to the decision that will resolve the brand identity of the modern Conservative party.

I must thank the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) for his kind remarks about my appointment and those of my Front-Bench colleagues. I am delighted also that the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea added a fresh conversion to the list: we have seen him turn from opposition to independence for the Bank of England to full support for it. We have also seen him turn from voting against the minimum wage to supporting it, if reluctantly.

This evening, the right hon. Gentleman has declared an astonishing conversion to support for the steps that I shall be supporting, as Minister for Women, to increase women's representation in this House. Even more astonishing, the right hon. Gentleman has brought with him the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). The hon. Gentleman is not present for this part of the debate, but I now understand that he is a convert to feminism. If I can achieve so much in a mere two weeks as the new Minister for Women, I look forward to seeing hon. Gentlemen from the Conservative party supporting the Bill that we expect to propose to enable the Conservative party, as well as our own party, to take the necessary measures to continue to deal with the under-representation of women in this House. Converts are always welcome.

I regret that Conservative Members have so little of value or strategic significance to say about how we build upon the economic stability secured over the last four years to promote enterprise and productivity. I regret that they have so little to say about how, in the modern economy, we move from an industrial base to a knowledge-driven economy, and so little to say about how we harness the talent of all our people in the service of both a more inclusive society and a more efficient and dynamic economy. I regret the fact that this evening we heard again the familiar talking down of the strengths of the British economy and the same old, and frankly tired, complaints about red tape.

I shall remind the House of what independent and authoritative observers have to say about the state of the British economy. The Economist Intelligence Unit says:

"The United Kingdom remains one of the world's most attractive business locations over the next five years . . . The strengths of the UK's business environment over the next five years will continue to be the government's generally pro-business policy orientation, the depth and sophistication of the financial markets, the comparative lightness of the tax regime and the flexibility of its labour market."

That was written before my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced last week his latest reform to capital gains tax, which will give us an even more favourable environment for entrepreneurs and investment—indeed, it will result in the provision of an even more favourable regime for capital gains taxation than in the United States.

A. T. Kearney registered the fact that the United Kingdom rose to second place on the worldwide index as a destination of choice for foreign investors and confirmed its position as the single most favoured destination by far for foreign direct investment into the European Union. The vice-president of A. T. Kearney said:

"strong economic growth in the first three quarters of 1999, as well as the continued pro-business stance of the Blair government may all underlie this favourable British market position."

More recently, Arthur Andersen's world entrepreneurship survey rated us on a range of measures as No. 1 in the world as an environment for entrepreneurs. Those are fair measures of the success that we have already achieved in helping to create an effective environment for enterprise and investment.

The right hon. Member for Wells asked specifically about regulation. I remind him that one of the flagship measures in this year's Queen's Speech is an enterprise Bill that will bring forward radical, pro-competition reforms, including a new power for the competition authorities to scrutinise regulations for possible anti-competitive effects. That will be the next stage in

[Ms Patricia Hewitt]

a radical, far-reaching package of reforms to the frankly byzantine and out-of-date competition regime that we inherited from the Conservative Government.

Furthermore, the Regulatory Reform Act 2001 will give the House the opportunity and power to sweep away unnecessary, out-of-date, entangled old regulations. Quite inexplicably, Conservative Members voted against that measure. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor last week announced a radical simplification of the VAT system, a measure that will be particularly helpful to hundreds of thousands of smaller companies.

In contrast, the Conservative party has no strategic analysis of the way the modern economy is changing, or of the role of Government in a modern economy. The Government understand the changes that are taking place, which are driven by an extraordinary speed of technological change in the modern economy.

In their first four years, the Government set out to achieve the right framework for economic stability and to bring more than 1 million more people into employment. Upon that foundation of economic stability, the Government can now move to improve productivity and spread enterprise throughout our community. Upon that foundation of economic stability, we can introduce reforms to the economy that mean we will be even better placed to adapt to the change and restructuring that are taking place in an increasingly competitive global economy.

The stability that we have achieved means that we can move on to make the reforms that the country needs—to increase enterprise in every nation and every region of our country, to raise productivity and the skills of our work force to give us the most pro-competitive regime in the world, to support hard-working families and to enable opportunities to be extended to every individual.

We can do all that because we have made our choice. We set out that choice clearly in the election—it was between stability and a return to boom and bust; it was between full employment and mass unemployment; it was between investment in our future prosperity and public services or cuts in essential public services. Those cuts would have been the inevitable consequence of the utterly irresponsible promises being made by Conservative Members. Tax cuts—initially for £4 billion, then £8 billion, then £20 billion—would be paid for by public spending cuts affecting teachers, doctors, nurses and police officers.

We put a choice before the British people—

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

EU Cod Recovery Programme

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. McNulty.]

10 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I am very pleased to have the opportunity to raise this subject. I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will agree that, after the hiatus of the election, now is a very appropriate time for the House to return to the EU North sea cod recovery programme, which is especially important to our coastal communities. I am sure that I speak for many hon. Members who represent fishing interests in welcoming his reappointment to his important role as Fisheries Minister, which was greeted with relief. The prospect of a new and inexperienced Member being given such a technically difficult role at this especially sensitive time would have caused understandable concern. We are pleased to see him on the Front Bench this evening.

The purpose of this debate is twofold. First, will the Under-Secretary give the House a progress report on the current state of the cod recovery plan and the negotiations that surround it? Secondly, we would all be grateful if he could try to provide a somewhat better understanding of what was meant by Commissioner Fischler when he recently declared that the European Union white fish effort would have to be reduced by some 40 to 50 per cent. That statement, which was reported in the general and fishing press, has caused a great deal of alarm in our coastal communities. Any reassurance and explanation of the context of the statement would be very welcome.

Before I deal with some of the detailed aspects of the cod recovery programme, let me say that I am pretty certain that I am expressing the views of many hon. Members when I say that there is a palpable sense of anger and foreboding in our fishing ports—especially the small village-based industries around our coasts. Every week that passes and every new issue of *Fishing News* brings more frustration for the catching sector of the North sea fleet. For example, early in May, it was reported that the Republic of Ireland had been allocated through its national development plan for fisheries another £20 million for decommissioning and other purposes, including the development of shore-based facilities in ports.

If the arithmetic of my local fishermen is correct, the EU funds available to the Irish fleet in the period 2000–06 total some £75 million. That contrasts with the £6 million for decommissioning that is going to the English fleet and the £25 million allocated to the Scots fleet for the same purpose. On decommissioning, will the Under-Secretary respond to concerns about the fact that the scheme that has been announced is unlikely to be available much before the end of the current financial year? It will not be available to under-10 m boats and it may also be of most financial benefit in practice to Anglo-Spanish boats sailing out of ports such as Ayr. Alternatively, and equally perversely, it may involve payouts to Peterhead skippers whose boats are registered in that port but who never land fish there.

To make matters worse, we have heard the recent European Union announcements on the allocation of FIG—financial instrument of fisheries grant—fisheries guidance funds for diversification out of the catching

sector. The announcements showed that Spain was getting more in one year—more than 1 million ecu—than the UK was getting in the entire six years of the programme—some 225,000 ecu. Our fishermen are aggrieved not just about the direct effects of the efforts to protect stocks, but about the apparent unfairness of the way in which their interests are being protected by European Union common fisheries policy regimes. If the Minister can reassure me about any of those perceptions of unfairness, which were repeated to me numerous times on the doorsteps of fishermen, skippers and crewmen during the election campaign, I shall pass that on to skippers in ports such as Eyemouth, who believe that their interests are not being protected relative to those of their opposite numbers in EU sister states.

There is a clear feeling that greater involvement of skippers and crews should be taken into account when policy is formulated; that more regional control of fisheries management should be devolved back to local areas—parts of the North sea are a good example of that; and that the bankruptcy of fishermen and fishing catching sector enterprises should not be a deliberate tool of policy, which might, by default, be the case soon if left untouched.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): I spent part of the day with representatives of fishing interests—in particular, with those who are concerned about the 10-metre-and-under sector—in Pittenweem in my constituency. My hon. Friend's comments about anxiety were reflected in what I heard this afternoon.

Mr. Kirkwood: That does not surprise me. Places such as Anstruther and Pittenweem are coastal villages that form an important part of the industry. They are being affected directly and indirectly by some of the negotiations on the cod recovery plan.

The first thing worth noting about the plan is that the notion of closing principal spawning grounds for cod was thought to be a good idea just after I was elected in 1983. That was promoted by skippers and others who were knowledgeable about the industry on the Berwickshire coast. If that was the case 20 years ago, it cannot be argued that it is a great new idea that has just been dreamed up by scientists. At the time, the scientists said that it could not, or would not, help. That is another example of why skippers do not fully trust the scientific advice that they are given.

As I understand it, the cod recovery plan contains three main elements, all of which try to protect cod stocks in the North sea. The first is quota cuts that affect cod and, in parenthesis, other species with a cod by-catch, which is important for the Scottish industry. The second element is nursery closures in the North sea and the west of Scotland. The third relates to gear modifications.

It is almost impossible to argue against cuts in the cod quota, which has not been fulfilled in recent years. However, significant cuts have been made in the haddock, whiting and nephrops quota as a result of the by-catch issue. Those cuts most affect the industry in Scotland, and give rise to various questions. What progress has been made to restore the 2001 nephrops quota? That is an important, although perhaps premature, question, and I should like to hear the Minister's response. In conjunction with that, will there be a similar cut in the nephrops quota this year? Is there any intelligence on that and what is the

Minister's feeling about it? Finally, what measures will the Government put in place to ensure that the fleet remains viable in the light of a round of expected severe quota cuts in December? Those important questions are at the forefront of local skippers' minds.

Closures in the North sea and on the west coast of Scotland were based on areas of maximum catch during the spawning season. It was assumed that that would reduce the take of spawning female fish. How successful have those closures been? It should be possible to gain a preliminary idea of the scientific assessment of the data. Are scientific data available? If they are, will the Minister share them with us? If they are not, will he give us an idea of when they might become available? Will the closures be repeated, as expected, in 2002? If so, is it likely that those areas that were closed this year will be closed again?

What measures will be put in place to stop boats diverting to other fishing grounds—for example, the juvenile haddock grounds in the North sea? That question is particularly important for the fishermen in Eyemouth, in my constituency, who now fish for nephrops and are deeply worried that fishing effort will be diverted from the closed cod grounds to the haddock and whiting grounds and that effort will be further diverted to nephrops. Although subject to a quota, the stock of nephrops has not been particularly challenged, but it might be if diverted effort continues uncontrolled.

Finally, technical measures represent an important, third strand to the cod recovery plan negotiations. The debate about technical measures is continuing. The Commission's publicly stated position is that 120 mm mesh would be acceptable. However, I think that the Commission would be prepared to accept a 110 mm derogation for the first year. The French, because of their juvenile hake fishery, and the Scots, because of their whiting fishery, would prefer to advance no further than allowing a mesh size of 110 mm at present. However, as the Minister will know, I understand that the Norwegians, with whom key North sea stocks are shared, currently want a mesh size of nothing less than 135 mm.

If no agreement is reached between the Commission and Norway, the Norwegians could institute a 135 mm mesh size unilaterally in their waters. So will the Minister say something about the outcome of the crucially important EU-Norway round of the discussions, as those bilateral negotiations are of essential importance to those of my constituents who fish.

Do the Government envisage a substantial loss of whiting with the 120 mm net? If so, what will they do about any such loss? Finally, on technical measures, how will the problem of carrying two nets—one for EU waters and another for Norwegian waters—be addressed in future? Those are some of the issues that arise as a direct consequence of the continuing negotiations on the technical measures in the plan.

The catching and onshore processing sectors in my constituency are very pessimistic about the future. The Commission's plans for next year are still not clear; nor is it clear how long the current exercise will continue, but what happens if the cod stocks do not recover? That is the key question. It is not too early to start thinking about that quintessentially important question now, because the consequences will be immense if we get into the position that the Canadians were in with their North Atlantic white fish fishery. As we know, those grounds are still not yet open.

[Mr. Kirkwood]

No one who knows anything about this difficult problem thinks that its resolution will be easy. I do not envy the Minister's task; he has to reconcile all sorts of interests, but I know that he will do the best that he can. However, the House must understand that, if we are to provide any hope at all for those of our constituents who go down to the sea in ships and do business in great waters, the Minister needs to address himself urgently to some of those questions, and it would be of considerable assistance if he could answer some of them during this debate.

10.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) on the way in which he has made his case. He raised a number of pertinent points about the cod recovery plan, which I understand are of concern to his fishermen, his constituents and other hon. Members who are present. I can update the hon. Gentleman on the cod recovery programme, as details have only just been agreed and are not yet widely known. I am happy to go through those points in this debate so that the hon. Gentleman is aware of the latest situation.

I shall start by dealing with the subsidies announced by the Irish Government. It is of course for member states to decide how to apply FIFG—financial instrument of fisheries grant—money. I fear that the Irish proposals will result in a rerun of what happened in this country in the 1980s, when an awful lot of money was made available to the United Kingdom fleet for modernisation and building. That led to significantly increased capacity, and we then spent the 1990s using public money to decommission the fleet.

Given the pressure on fish stocks and the fact that, as I understand it, one justification given by the Irish Government is the exploitation of deep-water species, about which the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea advice is not good, I have some concerns about just where the boats will go. However, that is a matter for the Irish Government. I would not wish to interfere in their policy, apart from saying that I do not believe that using public funds to increase catching power and capacity is a good use of such funds. There are other areas in the UK and European fishing fleets to which money should go.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about decommissioning. I certainly hope that we can reach a conclusion on the matter before the end of the financial year. He will appreciate that we have to consult the industry on the shape of the decommissioning scheme, but I certainly hope that the proposals can be implemented as quickly as possible so that fishermen know exactly what is on offer and can make decisions accordingly.

Agreement with Norway has been reached in the 2001 negotiations on the cod recovery programme. I shall run through what is in that agreement. Although the negotiations have been difficult generally speaking, there is a problem with cod stocks, as the hon. Gentleman emphasised fairly. No one disputes that, and we must take action on it. We in the UK have to explain to the Commission the problems of a mixed fishery. There is of course logic in going for a bigger mesh size in a cod fishery. Indeed, in the cod fisheries in Norwegian, Faroese

and Icelandic waters, a 135 mm mesh size is not unusual. However, that would be much more difficult to introduce in a mixed fishery in the North sea. We have had to emphasise that point to the Commission on a number of occasions, shall we say, but we have made some progress.

The diamond mesh size is to be increased from 100 to 120 mm, with no square mesh panel required in the North sea. All species caught within that mesh size can be retained, subject to quota availability. The present 100 mm beam trawl fishery for plaice is to increase to 120 mm. For one year until 31 December 2002, the 110 mm diamond mesh fishing will be allowed in the European Community area of the North sea—our mixed fishery zone—with a 90 mm square mesh panel, as we have at the present time.

The target fishery will be 50 per cent. of any mix of haddock, whiting, plaice, sole, lemon sole, skate, ray, anglerfish or monkfish, in which a 25 per cent. cod by-catch will be allowed. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the original proposal was for 15 per cent. We argued strongly that, by comparison with the normal by-catch in the fishery, that was not realistic for the UK. The last thing we wanted was increasing discards as a result of setting an unrealistic by-catch percentage. Although we understand that 25 per cent. is tough for the industry, it is certainly more manageable than the 15 per cent. originally suggested.

The nephrops fishery mesh size becomes 80 mm, which is already applied in many cases. The 80 mm otter trawl fishery in the southern North sea remains. All 80 mm otter trawls must incorporate a square mesh panel and a 140 mm diamond mesh in the cover of the net, as is currently applied in the Irish sea.

Sorting grids will be mandatory for the 32 mm pandalus shrimp fishery. The UK twine thickness standard of 8 mm single or 5 mm double has been adopted as part of the agreement. For static gear, the EC mesh size for cod increases from 120 mm to 140 mm; Norway will retain 148 mm in its own fishery.

The House might be interested to learn that, in connection with the controversy about industrial fishing, Norway has agreed to close an area on the Bergen Bank to all industrial fishing for Norway pout, blue whiting and sand eel, because significant quantities of juvenile haddock and whiting have recently been taken in those catches. I am sure that that will be welcomed by our industry, which has frequently expressed concern about the impact of industrial fishing.

After being a lone voice on the subject of industrial fishing, I am pleased to find other countries taking an interest. I emphasise that the Danish Government have been highly co-operative and have shared information and technical knowledge with the UK on those issues.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): The Minister's voice might have been a lone one in EU councils, but it certainly has not been in the House. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his reappointment as Fisheries Minister: he is the pole star in the changing world of the Government ranks. Will he address two points relating to the deal that has been struck? First, there is the issue of closed areas diverting effort into other fisheries; it is not only a question of mesh size. Again, I commend the strategy of a tie-up scheme. This year's

voluntary tie-up probably saved 10 million juvenile haddock, but I have strong doubts whether a voluntary tie-up will be available again.

Secondly, will the Minister address the issue, which I know he understands, of slow-pulling highly selective fisheries, such as the seine-net fishery? Whatever mesh size is agreed in whichever area, some fishing boats that pursue the most select fishery might be disadvantaged. It would be an irony if such boats were pushed out of the equation, because they are surely the ones that we want in terms of selective fishery doing less damage to fish stocks. I should like to see some recognition that the Minister is fishing for the seine-net position within the overall deal.

Mr. Morley: To deal with the latter point first, I have sympathy with the argument about the nature of fishing and its selectivity. I do not think that proper attention has yet been paid to the way in which different fishing techniques have differing impacts on fish stocks. I had a private discussion with Commissioner Franz Fischler on that very point. I emphasised that, in addressing the recovery plans, we should not adopt a one-club approach. The main strategy is to reduce effort and fleet size. That has a role, but we should take a more sophisticated approach to recovery plans and consider the range of fishing techniques and their different impacts. I have a lot of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's point, but we have more work to do in terms of quantifying the argument and convincing the Commission to take it on board.

The hon. Gentleman knows where I stand on the issue of tie-up grants. My mind is not closed to any approach, but I remain to be persuaded that the large sum of money that would be involved in a tie-up represents good value for money, or that the policy would have the effect we want. It might be regarded as a short-term solution to a long-term problem. There are several points on which we still need to be convinced.

On the cod recovery plan, I must emphasise that the 110 mm fishery is important in relation to mixed fishery. I know that the industry is worried about how long it will be continued. The original proposal is that it would be for one year only—2002. However, we have agreed with the Norwegians that it will be reviewed at the end of that year—it will not be for one year, and then finished. The review will enable us to consider the impact of the 110 mm mixed fishery. We have also agreed that that review will include proper consideration of the fishery's socio-economic impact. That examination, carried out over the course of the year, will help negotiations on future cod recovery plans.

There is no doubt that larger mesh sizes are the right approach, but we have to take the socio-economic impact into account and carry the fishing industry with us. The industry is willing to be co-operative. The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire pointed out that cod recovery, closed areas and spawning were under discussion 20 years ago. However, we are now making progress because there has been a fundamental shift in attitude in the fishing industry. It recognises that there are severe problems with many fish stocks, including nearly all commercial stocks, and accepts that conservation action has to be taken. It has therefore participated in discussions.

As a Minister, I have tried to ensure that the fishing industry has been involved in all discussions at every stage. Its input has been invaluable; its experience and

participation have been sensible and mature and have shaped the development of the cod recovery programme. It has certainly helped us to convince the Commission that its original proposals on technical measures were not workable; not only would they have a dramatic impact on fishermen, but they would not necessarily achieve the conservation outcomes that the Commission, the industry and we all want. We have therefore made a bit of progress and now have the opportunity to discuss with the industry the future stages of technical measures and the impact of the 110 mm and 120 mm mesh sizes; we can try to evaluate the application of the 120 mm mesh, how it works and its effects on the industry.

Information has been collected on by-catch figures for the nephrops fishery in the North sea. From our figures, it appears that the white fish by-catch is low in that fishery, which will allow us to argue for the 10 per cent. reinstatement that was part of the agreement that we reached last year. We have also been waiting for the ICES advice on North sea stocks; it has just come out and is promising for nephrops stocks, which seem to be in pretty good shape in the North sea—we want to try to keep them that way. However, there is a problem. The main difficulty is the Commission's determination to restrict any fishery that may have a potential cod by-catch. The fact that we have been collecting figures to present our case will be helpful in the fishery negotiations that we will be having on nephrops stocks.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the success of the closed areas on spawning. As he will appreciate, it is too early to say at this stage, as the hatched eggs are in planktonic form, so the success of spawning cannot be measured until the autumn of next year. However, when we have those figures, they will give us an indication of the success of the closed areas. Both the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) made a point about diversion to other grounds, which is an issue that we recognise. It is partly in the hands of the industry itself, which well knows the impact of diversion and concentration on particular areas, recognising that in this year's recovery programme. We shall discuss the matter with the industry and shall try to tackle it.

Finally, the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire spoke about the two-net rule, which will be applied as part of the outcome of the Norwegian talks. I do not think that it will be problem; carrying two nets is already allowed under Norwegian regulations, so there should not be a problem for vessels carrying two nets—one can be used in the Norwegian zone for directed cod fishery and one for mixed fishery in the North sea.

In conclusion, the issues are complex and the negotiations difficult. We are facing serious problems with cod stocks in the North sea and a range of other white fish stocks. We are determined to deal with those problems and make progress, and we want to do that with the full involvement of fishermen and the full engagement of the industry; we want to involve them in discussions and take their views into account. We can make progress, improve the position and move towards a sustainable fishing industry, which is the objective of the industry, the Government and all those who represent fishing communities.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Ten o'clock.



House of Commons

Tuesday 26 June 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER in the Chair]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

PRIVATE BILLS [LORDS] (Revival)

Ordered,

That so much of the Lords Message [21st June] as relates to the Barclays Group Reorganisation Bill [Lords] and the National Australia Group Europe Bill [Lords] be now considered.

Resolved,

That this House concurs with the Lords in their Resolution.—
[The Chairman of Ways and Means.]

Message to the Lords to acquaint them therewith.

WAYS AND MEANS

SESSIONAL RETURNS

Ordered,

That Returns be laid before the House for Session 2000-01 of information and statistics relating to—

- (1) Business of the House;
- (2) Closure of Debate, Proposal of Question and Allocation of Time (including Programme Motions);
- (3) Sittings of the House;
- (4) Private Bills and Private Business;
- (5) Public Bills;
- (6) Delegated Legislation and Deregulation Orders;
- (7) European Legislation, &c.;
- (8) Grand Committees;
- (9) Chairmen's Panel; and
- (10) Select Committees.—[The Chairman of Ways and Means.]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Smoking

1. **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire): What progress has been made in assessing the impact of under-age smoking on physical development. [480]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): The evidence shows that smoking during childhood and adolescence increases respiratory problems and may retard the rate of lung growth, and also increases the chance that these people

will continue smoking as adults. That is why it is welcome that under-age smoking prevalence fell from 13 to 9 per cent. between 1996 and 1999, but why we need to go further in addressing under-age smoking.

David Taylor: Is the Minister aware of the research that has been undertaken by the university of Strathclyde, the results of which show that there is an extremely strong tendency for under-age smokers to poison themselves with the products of the firms whose cigarettes are most heavily promoted? Does she agree that that leads to the ineluctable conclusion that the reintroduction of the Bill to ban tobacco advertising should take place not only during this Parliament, as the Labour party manifesto promised, but during the current Session, which is what Labour Back Benchers want?

Yvette Cooper: I am aware of the research that my hon. Friend has mentioned. I welcome his strong support for the tobacco Bill. It is an important part of the strategy to reduce deaths from smoking. I think that, like me, he will be disappointed that the Bill is not already on the statute book, thanks to the Conservative party's decision before the election to sabotage it. We are committed to reintroducing the Bill in this Parliament as soon as time allows. Governments must take difficult decisions, but my hon. Friend will be aware of the comments of my right hon. Friends the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister on this subject.

NHS Acute Beds

2. **Sue Doughty** (Guildford): If he will make a statement on the number of acute beds in NHS hospitals. [481]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): Latest figures show that there are about 108,000 acute beds in the national health service. The NHS plan provides for the first increase in general and acute beds for more than 30 years. We have given a commitment to provide an extra 2,100 general and acute beds and 5,000 extra intermediate care beds by 2004.

Sue Doughty: Is the Minister aware that, of the 366 beds in the Royal Surrey county hospital, 41 are occupied by long-stay care patients who should be going on to nursing care? Does the Minister have any plans to increase the funding for social services to provide adequate care? Does she have any plans to lift the threats to community hospitals in Surrey?

Ms Blears: I am glad of the opportunity to welcome the hon. Lady to Parliament. It is always a pleasure to see another woman in this place, even if she is not in my party. We are well aware of the position in West Surrey. We have already provided significant extra resources to help to reduce waiting times. An extra £33 million has been provided during the current financial year. New medical admission units are helping at the Royal Surrey and Ashford hospitals. There are an extra five critical care beds at the Royal Surrey hospital.

I am of course aware of the pressures on delayed discharges. We must change the way in which services are organised to meet patients' needs. The issue is not

only about bed numbers. We must have the right type of beds at the right time in the right place to meet patients' needs. We are also putting extra money into social services. There will be 3.4 per cent. more over the next three years. That will be a real-terms cash increase of 12 per cent. for social services. Local organisations should work together to ensure that their systems work for patients. There is much more to do, but we are making genuine progress.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): May I warmly welcome my hon. Friend to her new job? I warmly welcome also the increased numbers to which she has referred. However, is she aware of the worry among many heart patients in the South Yorkshire area, given the possible closure or reduction in facilities at the Northern general hospital arising from the rationalisation of heart transplant units throughout the country? Many people are worried that this process will have a serious effect on heart treatment for patients in the South Yorkshire and Yorkshire and Humberside areas.

Ms Blears: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her kind words. I am aware of the deep concern of many people in South Yorkshire and in many other areas where these matters are being considered. I understand that they are being considered by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. Obviously we must ensure that there is no knock-on effect, whatever the decisions might be, for people who need treatment as a result of coronary heart disease. That is a top priority for our Government. Decisions will be taken in due course on these extremely important matters.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): May I welcome the hon. Lady to her new job and ask her whether she will, for a moment, rejoin the real world? Is she aware that West Sussex has had £15 million stolen from its social services money by the Government, to be redistributed elsewhere? Is she also aware that 30 beds are blocked at the East Surrey hospital and at Crawley hospital, and that 20 beds are blocked at the Princess Royal hospital in Haywards Heath? Does the hon. Lady understand that the kind of glib answers that she has given provide no comfort to the many old people who are in the wrong place at the wrong time and who badly need to get into a better kind of care?

Ms Blears: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, where I come from, we are rooted in the real world and our feet are on the ground. We are extremely aware of the pressures on social services and on the health service, and we do not seek to deny them. We put in place the practical policies and resources that were never available for social services under previous, Conservative Governments. There were massive cuts during their Administrations, rather than real-terms increases of 12 per cent. in personal social services.

Patients want services that are designed to meet their needs at the time when they need them. The Conservatives make simple calculations: they like to talk about numbers and simple facts. However, the health service is a complex organisation and we need to ensure that the services that the NHS and social services provide take into account the complex needs that people have. We are determined to meet the needs of patients at the right time and in the right

place. The difference between us and the Conservatives is that we have put our money where our mouth is and put the resources into the service.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must tell the House that I need briefer questions and, of course, briefer answers.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): May I join other hon. Friends in congratulating my hon. Friend on her elevation to the Front Bench? When she considers the number of acute beds in NHS hospitals, will she look particularly closely at maternity units? Does she recognise the need to roll out more money for extra investment in such units? She may also be aware of the visit that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State paid to Northwick Park hospital during the election campaign to look at the maternity unit that serves my constituents. I think that he was taking time out from trying to find the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). In the light of my right hon. Friend's visit—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think that the Minister can now reply.

Ms Blears: I shall try to be brief, Mr. Speaker. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. As he may know, we have put an extra £100 million into maternity services and intend to recruit an extra 2,000 midwives. Improving maternity services is a top priority for this country, because women deserve the best services at that time in their lives.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): May I add my congratulations to the hon. Lady on her appointment? Today's *Hansard* contains a written answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) on delayed discharges, which clearly shows an increase in the last recorded quarter to 31 March last year. The hon. Lady was talking about the real world. In the real world, there are queues of ambulances outside the overfilled Birmingham hospitals. Will the hon. Lady accept that the Government have made no progress at all on bed blocking?

Ms Blears: No, I do not accept that at all. There are real problems of delayed discharges for social services, but I understand that there have been meetings in the past seven days—Birmingham is a case in point—between local authorities and the national health service to try to ensure that a system can be put in place to increase capacity for people awaiting discharge, and that the services are used in an appropriate way.

We are also introducing care trusts. That is one of our policies aimed at ensuring that people get better services, in which we establish links between the national health service and council services such as housing. Problems in that area are often the reason for delayed discharges, and we need better integration between the national health service and local government to ensure that services are provided in the right place at the right time.

NHS (Private Finance)

3. **Mr. Colin Breed** (South-East Cornwall): What assessment he has made of the impact of private finance within the NHS. [482]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): The private finance initiative is making a major contribution to the biggest hospital-building programme the NHS has ever seen. Through the PFI, six major new hospitals have opened and another 17 are under construction, representing capital investment in the NHS of more than £2 billion.

Mr. Breed: The Secretary of State will be aware that the people of Liskeard, in my constituency, have been waiting for their new hospital for a very long time and that it is hoped that that will be provided very shortly through a private finance initiative scheme. Will he confirm that, should that PFI scheme fall through for any reason whatsoever, other resources available to him will be used so that the hospital can be brought on-stream at the very earliest opportunity?

Mr. Milburn: I will need to examine the individual case that the hon. Gentleman mentions. However, whenever the go-ahead is given to a new hospital—as he will know, for very many years the go-ahead was given to very few hospitals, and there is an enormous backlog in new developments, renovation and rebuilding—we test to determine whether the private finance initiative or funding through the Exchequer route would be the best value for money for patients and the taxpayer. Very often the PFI comes up with the goods, but sometimes it does not. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall consider each and every such case to ensure that local communities receive the services that they need and that taxpayers receive the value for money that they require.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): On the concordat with the private sector, does the Secretary of State have any idea of the proportion of doctors working in the private sector who also work part time in the national health service? What steps are the Government taking to ensure that those doctors' patients who are on health service waiting lists are not being disadvantaged by those doctors' involvement in the private sector?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and his continual guidance on the subject. He keeps me on the straight and narrow.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): No, he does not.

Mr. Milburn: That is a matter of opinion.

There are two answers to my hon. Friend's question. As he is aware, we are in the middle of a quite complex and difficult negotiation with the British Medical Association on a new contract for consultants. Like many people in the profession and the national health service, I think that a new contract is long overdue. A very simple deal is on offer for the BMA and for consultants; we will pay more money to NHS consultants for working in the national health service in exchange for their giving up

some of the work that they do on privately paid-for patients. That seems a good deal for both doctors and patients.

As my hon. Friend also well knows, the vast majority of doctors working in the private sector also work in the national health service. By and large, private sector hospitals do not employ their own doctors but take advantage of the doctors whom we employ. It seems to be right and proper that, wherever care is provided, whether in a private sector hospital or in an NHS hospital, we do not end up with the absurd situation in which we transfer NHS doctors and nurses away from treating NHS patients. It is NHS patients who should come first.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): The Secretary of State will know that there has been a great deal of interest in the clinical staffing of elective surgical units to be provided by private partners under public-private partnerships. He himself—although not the Prime Minister—seems to have ruled out the provision of clinical staff by the private sector. Can he confirm whether that includes ruling out the use of clinical staff employed by a private agency to work in those units?

Mr. Milburn: I think that both sides of the House agree that the biggest problem in the NHS is not so much a shortage of cash as a shortage of capacity. As we said in 1997 and repeated in the just-finished general election campaign, there is therefore no case for transferring NHS doctors, nurses and clinical staff out of the national health service. It is important that we keep clinicians, clinical services and clinical staff inside the NHS.

I should, however, clarify one other point as I know that the hon. Gentleman is rather obsessed with the idea that public is bad and private is good. We take a completely different view. Our view is that we will use the private sector when it is appropriate to do so and when the private sector can bring something to the table, whether that is expertise or finance, although there are clear boundaries around that involvement. Moreover, reform of the national health service has to be led by people within the national health service.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Are any NHS medical services, equipment or treatments being provided by means of private finance but under contract to the NHS?

Mr. Milburn: Medical equipment is being provided by private sector suppliers, as has long been the case. People sometimes say that private sector firms should not be making a profit out of the national health service, but that is simply one of the absurd arguments about the issue. Who do hon. Members think have long been building national health service hospitals? Private sector firms have been making a profit out of that, as have equipment suppliers.

We must judge what is in the interests of the NHS, and there are some clear tests: can the private sector bring something to the table for the benefit of NHS patients, can we assure patients in the NHS that they will get the highest standards of care wherever they are treated, and most importantly, is the taxpayer getting a good deal?

Autism

4. Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): What the place of persons with autistic spectrum disorders is in the national strategy for learning disabilities. [483]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): Those who also have learning disabilities will benefit directly from the national strategy set out in "Valuing People". Furthermore, the Government are working with the Medical Research Council, professional bodies and other experts to examine current knowledge on autistic spectrum disorders and to consider how screening, diagnosis and early intervention can be improved.

Mr. Boswell: While thanking the Minister for that answer and welcoming her to her new post, may I ask her to acknowledge, with her prior knowledge of disability issues, the concern of the National Autistic Society that the present, rather ritualistic definition of learning disabilities in the learning disability White Paper is likely to exclude 80 per cent. of people within the autistic spectrum who are able or, in certain cases, highly intelligent? Will she have particular regard to the reference in the White Paper to the need for a proper assessment of communication and social skills in determining whether or not services should be provided, to ensure that local authorities do not, as they have threatened, withdraw those services because they have read one item and not another?

Jacqui Smith: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that it would be unreasonable of local authorities to withdraw services from people on the autistic spectrum on the basis of a very narrow definition. Of course the implementation of the learning disability White Paper proposals will improve services for those with learning disabilities, but by bringing together health, social care and educational agencies, we will have the scope to improve opportunities and services for people on the autistic spectrum. I recognise the concerns of the NAS, and my officials will be meeting the organisation in the near future to talk about their concerns in detail. We will, as we are committed to do, work on what more we need to do to improve services for people on the autistic spectrum.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): In giving a warm welcome to my hon. Friend the Minister in her new post, can I ask whether she agrees that people who experience autism are often gifted as well—for example, in art or music? Will she confirm that to help those people achieve fulfilment, the Government will continue with their commitment to advocacy, which was so important in the field of learning disabilities in the last Parliament?

Jacqui Smith: My right hon. Friend makes an important point concerning the wide range of needs within the autistic spectrum. I agree that for those high-functioning people with autism, it is extremely important that, when developing services, we enable them to have a voice on the way in which those services are delivered. That is why advocacy is at the centre of the learning

disability White Paper and the way in which we will develop all services, which will be centred on the users and will reflect their needs.

Mrs. Marion Roe (Bromborough): How does the Minister intend to speed up the early diagnosis of those with ASD? What support services will be available to the families of children who have ASD, because they, of course, are very important?

Jacqui Smith: My previous experience in this area suggests to me that we need to develop good working relationships between social services departments and education services. The hon. Lady will be aware that the Department for Education and Skills is consulting on and publishing the special educational needs code of practice, which will be very important in terms of the early identification of children with ASD. We are looking across Government at how we can develop help for children below the age of two by bringing together education and social services. As the hon. Lady rightly points out, our work to support carers and families through the NHS plan will be important in this area.

Primary Care

5. Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North): What proposals he has for delegating spending to NHS primary care groups and trusts; and if he will make a statement. [484]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): By 2004, we will ensure that primary care trusts control at least 75 per cent. of NHS resources. I also intend to allocate funding direct to primary care trusts rather than through health authorities. That will put the spending power directly in the hands of front-line NHS staff.

Mr. Hughes: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's answer, but is he aware that constituents of mine in Stainforth are having to wait up to two weeks for an appointment to see their general practitioner at the Field Road surgery? Ten years ago, there were only three GPs at that surgery. Now there are six, along with four nurses, eight receptionists, a practice manager and a practice secretary. It beggars belief that people are having to wait up to two weeks just for an appointment to see their GP. So will my right hon. Friend ensure that when he delegates that money, some of it is spent on ensuring that my constituents do not have to wait that long to see their GP?

Mr. Milburn: Yes—I would not dare say no, after that. There is a real issue here, in that although we have made progress in some aspects of waiting, there is an awfully long way to go. People tend to wait too long for treatment on the national health service, whether for a hospital operation or, sometimes, for a GP's appointment. That varies immensely—in some parts of the country, people can get access to a GP quite quickly, while in other parts, as my hon. Friend has just pointed out, people can sometimes wait two weeks or more to see their GP. We must put that right.

That is why I think that patients will in the end support the idea in the NHS plan that they will be guaranteed an appointment within a reasonable period of time—within 48 hours. Many GPs already guarantee that level of service to their patients. We reckon that between a third and a half of all GPs are already agreeing appointments within 48 hours. We now need to ensure that we put in place the resources and the reforms to other parts of primary care to make sure that that level of service is guaranteed not just for some patients but for every patient.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): May I join the Secretary of State's Back-Bench Members in seeking to keep him on the straight and narrow? Will he accept that however small the pieces of the cake, if the cake is not large enough it will not solve the health service's problems? My health authority tells me that the amount of growth money is dwarfed by the list of "must do" items, and their cost, emanating from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. Does the Secretary of State accept that when the "must do" list from NICE exceeds the growth money, funding is cut from services that are not subject to that guidance—the Cinderella specialties?

Mr. Milburn: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new duties on the Front Bench as the Liberal Democrat spokesman on health matters. His promotion is clearly very good news for him, and it is probably also good news for us. I noticed from the hon. Gentleman's website that he proudly boasts that he used to be an adviser to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes)—no doubt advising him in the art of humility and self-effacement. I just hope that the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon is more successful in his current job than he was in his previous one.

The hon. Gentleman referred to funding for the drugs and treatments that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence says are necessary for patients. As he is aware, we, at least, fought the election campaign on a manifesto commitment that in future, when NICE says yes to a drug or treatment, we would direct local health services to ensure that that is provided for the benefit of all NHS patients. Ultimately—the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), who is chuntering away, has been urging this on us—the decisions about how the money is spent must be taken locally rather than being taken nationally by me.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): In ensuring that extra resources go into primary care, will my right hon. Friend ensure that mental health is not forgotten? Will he also ensure that we do not repeat the problems of postcode medicine that have been faced in south Lancashire?

Sandra Gidley (Romsey): Postcode lottery—

Mr. Hoyle: I am asking the Secretary of State, not you.

Mr. Milburn: I do not want to intrude on private grief. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am tempted to say that he should perhaps take some tablets too. There has been a postcode lottery in these big services—mental health and so forth—and we must try to solve that. In the national health service, people want to know that they will receive treatment according to their needs and not

according to where they live, how much they earn or what they are worth. That is why it is right to have national standards and to have institutes such as NICE that can provide advice to people in the NHS about which treatments work and which do not. That is happening now.

I can certainly give my hon. Friend the assurance that, alongside cancer and coronary heart disease, services for the elderly and those who have mental health problems are at the top of our list of priorities.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Will the Secretary of State confirm that from now on, following the concordat that he signed with the private sector, primary care groups and primary care trusts will be able to buy care for their patients directly from the private sector, missing out the NHS as the primary provider?

Mr. Milburn: That is a matter for primary care trusts to decide—[*Interruption.*] If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will answer the question in my own way. He can pose it as he wishes, but just because I do not answer it as he wants does not mean that it is the wrong answer. Primary care trusts will be in the driving seat. They will have to decide how to spend the resources available. That is right and proper. In the end, there is a big difference between the hon. Gentleman's policy and ours. His policy is that public is bad and private is good. Ours is that the answer to the problems of the national health service lies in that service.

Dr. Fox: Why has the Secretary of State tried to pretend in the past few days that the concordat allows less freedom than it does, by talking about strict limitations on what provision the NHS can buy in the private sector? The document that he signed talks of

"not only at times of pressure but also on a more proactive longer term basis";

and, on elective care, of

"Primary Care Groups or Primary Care Trusts commissioning directly from a private and voluntary health care provider"—

the only limitation being:

"as long as they can demonstrate high standards and value for money".

Does the right hon. Gentleman not think that it does a disservice to politics in general when he pretends one thing during the election campaign and another to his Back Benchers, while the truth is that he has taken a major step forward for primary care groups and trusts to miss the NHS out entirely as the provider of care? Why does he not come clean and admit that that is what he is doing?

Mr. Milburn: I have just answered the hon. Gentleman's question. However, a fallacy lies at the heart of that question and, with respect, of his approach. As hon. Members on both sides of the House know, the truth is that, by and large, we thankfully have one monopoly provider and that is the NHS. As long as a Labour Government are in power, that will remain the position. NHS principles and the national health service are not up for sale.

The hon. Gentleman has an entirely different policy—it is one that not only did not win favour at the general election, but one that he is so scared about that he did not even talk about it during the campaign. On one further

minor point, I hope that he manages to retain his position when there is a Conservative Front-Bench reshuffle, because that would benefit the whole House and certainly the Government. Some of my hon. Friends have been dismayed that he has not thrown his hat into the Conservative leadership contest, but I have some words of comfort—[*Interruption.*]

Mr. Speaker: Order. I will give the Minister some words of comfort—I call the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley).

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): The strength of primary care trusts lies in the way they can respond to and meet local needs. When my right hon. Friend considers delegation, will he ensure that the allocation of money to the trusts is speeded up? Also, in the modernisation process that is taking place in the national health service, will he ensure that we do not end up with larger primary care trusts than those that have just been set up? The trust in my constituency is doing a splendid job and I want it to continue to do so.

Mr. Milburn: Again, that is a matter for local discretion. The primary care groups that are moving towards primary care trust status must have a hand in that decision. It is obviously of benefit when the boundaries between local authorities—which, as has been noted, provide social services, housing services, and so on—and the primary care trusts are coterminous. The value of that is that it makes the system easier to operate and easier for patients to understand.

However, there should be no doubt about the Government's commitment. We want to make sure that the people who were in charge of front-line patient services—such as GPs, community nurses, representatives of the local community and local authorities—are in charge of the resources available for patients. That has to be right.

At present, about 50 per cent. of the NHS is controlled by primary care groups. I hope that 75 per cent. of the overall NHS budget will be controlled by primary care trusts by 2004. What is more, we need to remove some of the tiers of bureaucracy that stand in the way of the ability of front-line staff and services to do their jobs. That is why the NHS regional offices will be abolished, as will two thirds of health authorities.

NHS Pay

6. **Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): What plans he has for bringing the pay of NHS employees up to the level of comparably qualified people working in the private sector. [486]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): Independent pay review bodies recommend levels of pay for medical, dental and nursing staff, and for some allied health professionals. The review bodies are required to take account of recruitment and retention of their remit groups. In addition, we are working in partnership with trades unions and professional

organisations to agree modernised and fairer pay systems for all national health service employees. Our proposals for pay reform were outlined in the NHS plan.

Simon Hughes: I am disappointed that it is not the Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box. Labour's NHS plan states that the Government are in favour of a new pay system for the NHS, and figures published today detail the pay received by the service's humble and self-effacing nurses. They show that general nurses get about two thirds of what is paid for agency work, while a theatre-registered general nurse gets paid about half the rate for an agency job.

Is it the Government's plan to bring the pay of people who work for the national health service up to the levels available outside, so that they will not leave the service and work elsewhere? If so, will he ensure that all those working for the NHS come within the pay review body structure? Above all, will he ensure that ambulance personnel receive the sort of pay that people who save lives every day deserve?

Mr. Hutton: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are serious about pursuing the matter of pay modernisation and reform in the NHS. The NHS is the biggest employer in the country, with more than 1 million staff. It is trying to recruit and retain staff in a very competitive labour market. Good progress has been made with the introduction of new retention and recruitment schemes for primary care staff, nurses and others, but there is, of course, more to be done. However, the key to the reform of the pay system, for which the hon. Gentleman and others have called, will be to make progress on the proposals that we outlined in February 1999.

Those proposals to oversee and overhaul the pay system were confirmed in the NHS plan, and they depend on establishing a modern system of job evaluation. It is very important that we get that right, which is why we are trying to reach agreement with the trade unions and the professional organisations.

It is very important for the NHS to make progress on pay. We are serious about making progress as quickly as we can.

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): Surely one of the best ways to reward and motivate NHS staff is to identify and promote best practice, wherever it occurs. Will my hon. Friend the Minister deny the outdated dogma of "private sector good, public sector bad", and seek change and higher morale in the NHS by looking at existing best practice in our surgeries and hospitals?

Mr. Hutton: I agree very strongly with my hon. Friend. The big problem for the NHS has existed since the beginning in 1948: how do we incentivise and reward good practice across the service, so that people in Cumbria or Cornwall can be equally confident that they are getting the best possible service? I also agree that a key approach is to find new ways to reward and incentivise staff, and we are prepared to do that.

However, although pay is an important element, the Government can do other things to improve the morale of NHS staff and to help with their recruitment and retention. For example, we can ensure that the NHS is the best

employer in the country, as well the biggest. We can look at child-care facilities, provide access to such things as low-cost housing, and make more widely available across the service more family friendly patterns of employment. All of that will help the NHS in all parts of the country, as well as in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Mr. Speaker: I call Mr. Desmond Swayne.

Mr. Milburn: Hear, hear.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I thank the Secretary of State for his welcome.

What did the Government mean when they told the review body for nurses' pay that there was

"no case for a special pay response from us this year on grounds of recruitment and retention"?

What planet is the Minister on?

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman lives on the same planet as the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames). It is not one inhabited by normal human beings.

What we mean is that there is a job of work to be done to improve recruitment and retention across the NHS. That is precisely what we are doing. We have announced new plans and new proposals to make sure that we make progress. There is no question of our not living in the real world.

Conservative Members are full of the NHS now, the things that are wrong with it and what they want to put right, but I remind them that during the month of the general election campaign they would not talk about it at all. They were too frightened and too embarrassed about their policies to have the confidence to talk about them to the public.

Demographic Change

7. Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): What new resources he will make available for areas of continuing population growth. [487]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): My hon. Friend's constituency will benefit from the increased investment that the Government are making in the national health service. In distributing the increased investment, we allocate funding to health authorities on the basis of the relative needs of their population. The most important determinant of need for health services is the size of the population, and each year we update the formula that we use to take account of the latest available population projections from the Office for National Statistics.

Dr. Starkey: May I remind the Minister that Milton Keynes is one of the fastest-growing cities in the country and has had an increase in population year on year of 2 per cent. for more than a decade? Although some extra beds have been provided in our hospital and we are to have a new diagnostic and treatment centre, the occupancy rate for adult acute beds averages 93 per cent. My hon. Friend's fellow Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), who visited the hospital before the election campaign, understood the stress that the hospital was under, and he

has also received a letter from consultants at the hospital stressing their problems. Will she urgently consider providing both capital and revenue inputs now to bridge the gap until the new diagnostic and treatment unit comes on stream?

Jacqui Smith: I recognise the pressure that staff at Milton Keynes general hospital are working under. I have seen the letter that my hon. Friend sent to my hon. Friend the Minister. I thank her, as an advocate for her constituency, and the staff of the hospital for the good work that they are doing under difficult circumstances. I agree that it is important that the plans for the new diagnostic and treatment centre are taken forward as quickly as possible. I understand that the project board has been set up.

I understand my hon. Friend's concern about extra funding to deal with some of the problems. We are actively considering a recent bid from the health authority for £1 million of additional resources for Milton Keynes general hospital. That bid is receiving extremely active consideration from my hon. Friend the Minister. That money would be on top of the extra resources that the authority has already received.

It is important that, in undertaking its modernisation review, the health authority looks at the particular needs of the Milton Keynes area and how they can be addressed. I hear what my hon. Friend eloquently says on behalf of her constituents, and I know that my hon. Friend the Minister, who is considering that bid, has also heard it.

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire): Is the Minister aware that, despite the projections, my constituents in North-East Bedfordshire still find themselves with a health authority that is some £17 million underfunded, even though it is an area of substantial population growth? When can she reassure my constituents that adequate resources will be made available by her Government before that population growth comes on stream so that we do not have continually to play the inadequate game of catch-up?

Jacqui Smith: As I have already outlined, the key issue for the hon. Gentleman's constituents is how the formula allocates the resources. We have already made it clear in the NHS plan that we are anxious to reduce inequalities, that that would be a key criterion for allocating NHS resources and that we shall be considering how to level up the resources of less well funded health authorities. The hon. Gentleman, who has experience of election campaigns, both successful and unsuccessful, has a bit of a cheek to return to the House pressing for extra funding after campaigning during the election on a promise of between £16 billion and £20 billion of cuts. One cannot say one thing to the country and another to the House.

Macular Degeneration

8. Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): What treatment is available within the NHS for macular degeneration. [488]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): There are two kinds of age-related macular degeneration. Dry age-related macular degeneration accounts for 90 per cent. of cases

and has no currently available treatment. Wet age-related macular degeneration can be treated with laser coagulation and photodynamic therapy on the NHS.

Mr. Simpson: I know that the Minister will share my concern about the increasing numbers of older people who suffer from macular degeneration—bleeding at the back of the eye that destroys all central vision and results in near blindness. I know that she is also aware that the Queen's medical centre in my constituency is one of four centres of excellence which are offering treatments in the United Kingdom that had previously been available only in other parts of Europe.

I am sure that the Minister will be delighted to know that those treatments take up no more than half an hour of NHS time, but I am sure that she will share my concern to discover that patients in Nottingham are being told that they cannot have access to such treatment under the NHS unless they can fork out £1,000 a time for it. Will she look into the charging process that makes those treatments available in our own funded programmes, and give the House some assurance about when we shall be able to guarantee that those treatments will be available on the basis of need, not wealth?

Yvette Cooper: I can assure my hon. Friend that I will look into the cases that he describes. I am not aware of the details that he is talking about. I know, however, that we have asked the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to examine one of the proposed treatments, visudyne, which is being trialled in many areas across the NHS, to assess its clinical and cost effectiveness, so that we can follow set recommendations throughout the NHS instead of different recommendations being followed in different areas.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): May I correct the Minister and say that macular degeneration can be treated by using homeopathic remedies, by herbal remedies and by using acupuncture? Is not it very regrettable that, since the introduction of primary care groups in the national health service, the number of complementary therapies available in the health service has decreased? Will the Government look into that urgently? Was the Minister aware that last week was homeopathic awareness week, which of course was very important?

Yvette Cooper: I certainly congratulate the hon. Gentleman on finding an opportunity to raise complementary and alternative medicine in Health questions—the clock was ticking and I wondered when he would find the opportunity to do so. He has taken the opportunity to inform the House of the fact that last week was homeopathic awareness week.

I am interested to hear what the hon. Gentleman says about the possible impact of complementary and alternative medicine on treating age-related macular degeneration. He is aware that we have provided extensive information to primary care groups to promote their awareness of the impact that complementary and alternative medicine can have. The choice of treatments is obviously a decision for primary care groups and trusts to take, but we are keen to ensure that they have full information about the benefits of complementary and alternative medicine so that they can take informed decisions in the interests of their patients.

Basildon Hospital

10. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): If he will make a statement on measures proposed to improve the accident and emergency department at Basildon hospital. [491]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): Of the £150 million that has been invested in improving accident and emergency departments across the country, Basildon has received £338,000, which has already helped to fund the refurbishment of the resuscitation room and provision of a children's waiting area.

Andrew Mackinlay: I thank the Minister for that reply. When the Secretary of State had just become a junior health Minister, I introduced an Adjournment debate, which I expect he will recall. In prophetic terms, I explained that the closure of the Orsett hospital A and E department—the decision was made under the Conservative Administration—meant that the Basildon A and E department would not be able to cope. Will she send some of her folk down from the Ministry to have a look? There is massive overcrowding, people have to stay in the A and E department because they cannot go on to the wards and there is bed-blocking, which is largely caused by Essex county council. That needs to be tackled. We are in a crisis in which I can no longer acquiesce by my silence, and I will not do so.

Ms Blears: I am aware of my hon. Friend's consistency on the matter and that he raised it again in his contribution on the Queen's Speech. We have already done better than sending officials down, because, in February, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State visited with my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith), who has made similar representations for a long time. As a result of that visit, an extra £7.2 million was awarded to build a third storey on top of new wards. That will provide an extra 108 beds at the hospital, but, to help with emergency pressures in particular, the provision of a 27-bed ward is being brought forward six months. It will open just before Christmas and will be in place when the hospital experiences peak demand—over Christmas and into the new year. Although we hope to achieve a better flow of patients into those new beds, we are acutely conscious of the tremendous problems at Basildon and we shall continue to monitor them.

PFI Projects

11. Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): How many PFI projects are awaiting his approval. [492]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): Since May 1997, 64 major hospital schemes worth more than £7.4 billion have been given the go-ahead to proceed under PFI, representing the biggest hospital-building programme in the history of the national health service. For major schemes, Ministers approve the final PFI proposal in the full business case. No FBCs are currently awaiting approval by Ministers.

Dr. Lewis: Does the Minister recall that, last year, the NHS executive pulled the plug on two proposed PFI community hospitals, one in Sheppey and one at

Lymington? Since then, the Sheppey project has been built as a publicly funded hospital, but nothing has happened with regard to the hospital at Lymington, which is desperately needed to serve the New Forest area. Could the difference in treatment be explained by the fact that the hospital in Sheppey was in a Labour marginal seat and the one in the New Forest area was not?

Mr. Hutton: Labour Members used to be accused of being conspiracy theorists—clearly, that infection has spread to the ranks of Conservative Members. There were problems at Lymington of which the hon. Gentleman, to be fair to him, will be aware and the new primary care trust is trying to find a way forward as quickly as possible to resolve the outstanding issues that need to be addressed. We shall give our support to finding the speediest way possible to resolve the problems at Lymington.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): Through the Minister, may I thank the Secretary of State for a PFI project, which he has signed? The beautiful building rising in the centre of Bishop Auckland will be a superb example of the concept of public-private partnership, but may I tell them that an instruction to deliver is not a mandate to privatise? Will my hon. Friend ensure that the NHS is saved from an unnecessary and counter-productive battle and that we get on with the job, which he is doing so splendidly, of delivering?

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his remarks about the Bishop Auckland scheme and I remind the House that it is a good example of what the PFI can do. The public sector capital route would have required a 10-year rebuilding programme over three separate phases. Under the PFI, we were able to achieve that in one go over three years. He is absolutely right—it shows the benefits of private finance and public partnerships.

Let me say to my right hon. Friend, all my hon. Friends and Opposition Members that the Government have no plans to privatise the NHS. We have made that absolutely clear. We need and require a modern and effective relationship with the private sector and we shall achieve that, but we are not privatising the NHS. The NHS is not for sale.

Beta Interferon

12. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): When the decision by NICE on the availability of beta interferon to multiple sclerosis sufferers will be made. [493]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): The National Institute for Clinical Excellence is now consulting on the draft economic model and data on the cost effectiveness of beta interferon and glatiramer acetate. NICE anticipates that its appraisal committee will reconsider the evidence next month and, subject to any further appeals, we expect it to issue its final guidance by November this year.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Minister of State for that informative reply. Will he confirm that beta interferon for multiple sclerosis sufferers is effective only when it is used early in the course of the disease? Does he accept the estimate of the Multiple Sclerosis Society that hundreds of

people will be irrevocably disabled if they are denied access to the drug during the extension of the NICE appraisal? If he does, how can he guarantee that his Department's proper exhortation to continue prescribing the drug will be heeded at the local level?

Mr. Hutton: We do not issue guidance simply to amuse ourselves; its purpose is to deal with the situation that the hon. Gentleman describes. The wider issues about the benefits, or otherwise, of beta interferon are matters for the national institute to address. That is why we established it, and we await its guidance with interest.

Hugh Bayley (City of York): Does my hon. Friend accept that beta interferon is not the only treatment for multiple sclerosis? It is effective for some patients, but not for others. Does he agree that it is important that other treatments, such as specialist nursing, are made available? Will he assure me that NICE will also consider the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of other treatments for multiple sclerosis so that patients get the best possible treatment?

Mr. Hutton: I confirm to my hon. Friend that NICE is examining the widest possible range of treatments for people who suffer from multiple sclerosis. It is important that it has the opportunity to do that properly, on the basis of all the available evidence, and we have asked it to do precisely what he describes.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Does the Minister accept that the time that NICE is taking to determine the issue makes its acronym increasingly inappropriate? Will he confirm that beta interferon is significantly cheaper to buy in other countries, such as Australia?

Mr. Hutton: I do not know the price of beta interferon in Australia, but it is desperately important that NICE takes the time that it needs to get the judgment right. It thought that it needed more evidence before it could reach a properly balanced conclusion and we should give it the time to do that.

Bristol Royal Infirmary Inquiry

13. **Valerie Davey** (Bristol, West): When the report of the Bristol Royal Infirmary inquiry into the management and care of children receiving complex heart surgery will be published. [494]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): Professor Ian Kennedy, the chairman of the Bristol inquiry, has not yet submitted the report to me. When he does, I shall seek an early opportunity to present the inquiry's findings to the House and to publish the report.

Valerie Davey: The parents and friends of those who were directly affected by the events in Bristol have been waiting a long time for the report and will be disappointed to hear that reply. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the inquiry's findings are reported at the earliest possible moment and that that happens in Bristol, not London?

Mr. Milburn: The finalisation of the inquiry's report, is rightly and properly a matter for the independent inquiry, which we established to examine the serious issues raised by parents, families, doctors and other staff members. I look forward to receiving the report and, when I do, I assure my hon. Friend and her constituents that I shall try to address the House as quickly as possible and to ensure that it is published in full.

General Practitioners

14. **Mr. David Rendel** (Newbury): What plans he has to increase the number of practising general practitioners.

[R] [495]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): We are committed to increasing the number of general practitioners by at least 2,000 and GP registrars by 550 by 2004. We will also invest in 1,000 more medical school places on top of the 1,100 already announced. In March, we also announced a further investment of £135 million over the next three years to improve the recruitment and retention of GPs and nurses.

Mr. Rendel: I should make it clear that I have an interest in that my wife is a GP.

Does the Minister accept that many GPs have now reduced their consultation times to as little as five minutes because of the pressure on them? Does he further accept that that is far too short a time for them to give a proper first-class service to their patients? Given the mediocre means that he has just announced for increasing the number of GPs, does he accept that it will be many years before GPs can give a longer average consultation time to their patients?

Mr. Hutton: No, I do not accept much of what the hon. Gentleman says. We are all aware that GPs are expressing concerns, and I shall shortly be meeting the chairman of the general practitioners committee to discuss those concerns and other issues that he wants to raise. There is a serious way to deal with the issues, and then there is the Liberal Democrat way. The hon. Gentleman has just pooh-poohed £135 million worth of extra resource. I see his hon. Friends making hand gestures and behaving generally in a rather stupid fashion. The important thing is that we have set out the resources that we intend to provide. The hon. Gentleman's party failed to do that. We are working with GPs in a seriously constructive way to resolve the concerns that they and others are expressing.

BILL PRESENTED**EXPORT CONTROL**

Ms Secretary Hewitt, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Straw, Secretary Clare Short, Mr. Secretary Hoon, Secretary Tessa Jowell and Mr. Nigel Griffiths presented a Bill to make provision enabling controls to be imposed on the exportation of goods, the transfer of technology, the provision of technical assistance overseas and activities connected with trade in controlled goods; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 5].

Point of Order

3.31 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Will you be kind enough to clarify one particular point for the newly elected Members of the House? Is it correct that a newly elected Member should not table a question until he or she has made a maiden speech, but may ask a supplementary?

Mr. Speaker: It is the practice of the House, but it is not an absolute rule. I hope that that helps the hon. Gentleman and new Members.

Orders of the Day**Debate on the Address**

[FIFTH DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [20 June].

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:
Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament—*[Mr. Sheerman]*.

Question again proposed.

Rural Communities and Transport

Mr. Speaker: I have accepted the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

3.32 pm

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Address, at the end of the Question to add:

"But humbly regret that the Gracious Speech makes no reference to agriculture and the countryside, contains no proposals to assist farming, tourism and the rest of the rural economy to recover from foot and mouth disease, does not include any commitment to establish an independent public inquiry into the origins and handling of the epidemic, and does not explain how the new Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, from whose title agriculture is regrettably excluded, will protect the countryside and the environment without changes in planning policy to prevent excessive development on greenfield sites, to the detriment of balanced development of the inner cities; regret that specific measures to improve transport are notable by their absence from the Gracious Speech; and have no confidence that the Government will achieve the world-class public services that they promised prior to the general election."

I again congratulate the Secretary of State on her new appointment and I express my sympathy to her for the loss of her voice, with which I heard her struggling on the radio this morning. She is the first head of a new Department with wide responsibilities and she carries a formidable burden in that capacity. On behalf of the Opposition, I genuinely wish her well in the task that lies ahead. I welcome the creation of the new Department. In establishing it, the Prime Minister seems to have heeded advice that I first offered in an article in *Country Life* in 1994, although I would have defined its role slightly differently.

Before dealing with the crisis in rural communities, the plight of farmers and other matters referred to in our amendment, I want to mention the wider environmental agenda on which the future of agriculture and the countryside, not just in Britain but elsewhere, ultimately depends.

This is, as others have mentioned, the first British Government to be elected in the 21st century. I hope that, in future, environmental criteria will be one of the main benchmarks against which they will judge all their decisions, and by which they will measure the success of all their policies, not just those for which the Department has direct responsibility.

[Mr. Tim Yeo]

Sustainability is the great challenge for the new century. The world's population is growing, and all around the globe people naturally aspire to better living standards. As a result, unprecedented demands are being placed on our planet's natural resources. Meeting those demands in a sustainable way must now be the top priority for Governments everywhere. We are all stewards of our inheritance. It is our duty to leave behind a world better than the one we inherited—a world that is not consuming natural resources at an irreplaceable rate. That is a duty for which the Prime Minister has shown scant regard in the past four years.

Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): How does the hon. Gentleman reconcile sustainability with his manifesto commitment to reduce the price of petrol?

Mr. Yeo: May I give the hon. Gentleman a little bit of advice? From where he stands, the result of the general election was extremely bad news because it means that the Government Benches continue to be thickly populated by people who rise to ask planted questions.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): It did not get him a job in the last Parliament.

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend anticipates my point: the problem as far as the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Geraint Davies) is concerned is that only a very small number of those lackeys will be rewarded with ministerial posts. If I may offer him another piece of advice, I believe that the hon. Gentleman will command the respect of the House and of his constituents, and he might even gain the attention of his Front Benchers, if he speaks on the merits of the issue and offers constructive advice to the Government, instead of trying to make cheap debating points about what may or may not have been the record of previous Conservative Governments.

Few promises have been more spectacularly broken than Labour's pledge to be the greenest Government ever. However, in welcoming the Secretary of State, I recognise that she comes to the Department fresh, so we shall live in hope that the Government will repent of their errors.

On specific aspects of policy, I shall first explore another area on which Labour's record thus far has been truly dismal: agriculture. In the past four years, agriculture has been brought to the verge of extinction. Farm incomes have collapsed by two thirds, and 20,000 jobs a year have been destroyed in each of the past two years—even before foot and mouth disease hit Britain in February. I do not believe that a Labour Government would have allowed any other industry to suffer in that way without implementing a package of emergency measures, making regular statements to the House and establishing working parties and special Cabinet Committees to achieve the industry's survival. In 18 years of representing a rural constituency, I have never seen the farming community so demoralised or so despairing of its future.

The Secretary of State heads a new Department whose title does not even mention agriculture. She heads a team of Ministers in the Commons, not one of whom has agriculture as part of his main responsibilities. Those

omissions confirm the worst fears of many people in the countryside that Labour simply does not care whether farming survives as an important British industry.

It is not merely the title of the Department that conveys that chilling warning; it is the actions of the Labour Government over the past four years. In a period of steadily worsening crisis in farming, Labour has refused to block substandard food imports from entering Britain, even when they threaten human or animal health. Labour has refused to introduce honesty in food labelling, even though consumers are misled every day about the origins of the food they buy. Until foot and mouth disease struck, Labour refused to claim much of the available agrimonetary compensation, even though part of the cost of that cash help for British farmers is met by the European Union. Labour has refused to protect the best and most versatile agricultural land from the threat of development, even though that risks irreversible loss of Britain's finest farmland. Labour has refused to stop gold-plating Brussels regulations putting ever greater burdens on farmers, slaughterhouses, food processors and thousands of other businesses. Labour has refused to protect conventional and organic farmers from the threat posed by genetically modified crop trials that are neither properly controlled nor effectively monitored. I urge the Secretary of State to reverse every one of those mistaken policies.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Will the hon. Gentleman display his knowledge of agriculture by telling the House which UK industry receives more subsidy than any other? Which UK industry receives a subsidy equivalent in amount to the subsidies given to all others?

Mr. Yeo: I am bound to say that even I, with my extensive knowledge of the way in which Labour has treated agriculture for the past four years, was not aware that it was the Labour Government's policy to cut further the subsidies that are currently paid. We live in a world in which every advanced and wealthy country subsidises its farmers. If Britain alone were to go down the route that is advocated by the hon. Gentleman and perhaps supported by his party, then as night follows day, what remains of a once great British industry would be immediately destroyed.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): Much of what the hon. Gentleman has told the House is myth. We should look at the detail. Does he agree that the detail is what is important? Was not it a Labour Government who introduced a ban on liquid condensate? On a range of issues, the Labour Government have—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman displays his knowledge by not even knowing what I am talking about. He should look at the record of the previous Conservative Government and at what this Labour Government will do.

Mr. Yeo: It is this Labour Government who have refused to take any action against poultry meat imports from the far east, where growth-promoting drugs are used that have been banned throughout the European Union on health grounds. It is this Labour Government who have refused to take action against French or German beef that contains illegal and dangerous cuts. It is this Labour

Government who deliberately talked out a Bill that was introduced by a Conservative Back Bencher last year which would have introduced honesty in food labelling.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): It would be illegal.

Mr. Yeo: The Under-Secretary of State says from a sedentary position that it would be illegal to introduce honesty in food labelling. That is exactly the problem. The Labour Government refuse to contemplate any action to defend the position of either British consumers or British producers. If they are not willing to take on the bureaucrats in Brussels on that issue, there is no hope that anything remotely resembling a level playing field will ever be introduced for British agriculture. British taxpayers would regard it as a perfectly proper use of their money to fight a legal action to introduce the principle of honesty in food labelling. As soon as there is a Conservative Government, we will put that at the top of our priorities.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): What the shadow Minister said earlier is simply incorrect. In the previous Parliament, the Labour Government banned four antibiotic growth promoters, including Virginiamycin. As someone who holds himself up as an expert in agriculture, perhaps he would apologise to the House for getting that wrong.

Mr. Yeo: Again, the hon. Gentleman has made my point for me. This Government are willing to stop those practices in Britain, but they do nothing at all to stop goods that have been produced using the same practices abroad from coming into the British market.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): On the subject of legality and otherwise, does the hon. Gentleman remember the Merchant Shipping Act 1988? The then Conservative Government were warned about the illegality of what they were doing—they were trying to define on grounds of nationality instead of residence. As a result of continuing with that, they ended up having to pay £100 million to Spanish quota hoppers. Is he recommending that course of action again?

Mr. Yeo: I am recommending a course of action that will protect British consumers from dangerous, substandard imported food. I believe that it is perfectly proper for the British Government to consider coming into conflict with the European authorities to protect British consumers. As it happens, both the European treaties and the World Trade Organisation rules contain specific provisions that allow the principle of free trade to be over-riden where considerations of human or animal health apply. Indeed, all I am suggesting is that the same standards that we apply to every other industry be applied to farming and to food products. We do not allow substandard products that may endanger human life to come into this country—for example, motor cars that do not meet European standards. Why should we allow food that fails precisely the same tests?

I move on to common agricultural policy reform. I hope that the Secretary of State will set out the Government's long-term aims. They should aim, first, to apply the

principle of subsidiarity to the CAP and, secondly, to end discrimination against farmers in member states that are outside the single currency area. That is an urgent issue, given the continuing weakness of the euro and the imminent expiry of the agrimonetary compensation arrangements. Thirdly, the Government should aim to rethink the basis of agri-environment schemes. I hope that the Government will publish a paper on the options for CAP reform and instigate a debate both inside and outside Parliament.

I turn now to foot and mouth disease. I regret to say that the Secretary of State did not get off to a happy start in her answers to questions on the issue last Thursday. Neither the tone nor the content of her replies to very reasonable questions from hon. Members on both sides of the House suggested that she realised the extent of concern in the countryside or the urgency of the measures that are still required. Hon. Members readily understand that after less than three weeks in the job, she will not be on top of all aspects of her brief, but her ignorance of some of the important issues is not, I am afraid, a reason for falling so quickly into the bad habits of her predecessor and making statements that are not true.

The responsibilities of the Secretary of State's new Department are wide ranging, and I trust that there will be another chance to debate foot and mouth disease specifically before the summer recess, but I want to touch briefly on four aspects of the epidemic today. First, a full and independent public inquiry is needed. Last Thursday, the Secretary of State steadfastly refused to countenance an inquiry on that basis—again confirming fears that the Government are hoping for a small, low-level review of the epidemic, conducted in a way that minimises the risk that ministerial blundering will be exposed to public gaze and that will prevent Ministers, including the Prime Minister, and former Ministers from being questioned in public.

The Prime Minister was, by his own account, in personal charge of handling the crisis from late March until, I understand, yesterday. His extraordinary claim that the Government were in the home-straight of defeating foot and mouth disease just before the election clearly owed everything to his wish to deceive voters into thinking that the crisis was over, and nothing to the facts. In the three months that the Prime Minister was in personal charge, he did not once see fit to make a statement on the subject in the House.

The scale of the disaster, the damage to the livestock industry, the countryside, tourism and the whole rural economy, and the enormous cost to the taxpayer clearly justify a full, independent public inquiry. To help that process, I am today publishing and placing in the Library possible draft terms of reference, and I am inviting my counterparts in all other parties to consider them and to suggest any amendments that they feel should be made, with the aim of reaching all-party agreement on this very important issue and about the need for the inquiry and the basis on which it will be conducted. I have also written this morning to the Secretary of State to make it clear that she would be most welcome to join any discussions that take place.

The second aspect of the epidemic is the need for a full recovery plan. Last Thursday, as reported at column 172 of *Hansard*, the Secretary of State confirmed that the Government would introduce such a plan, but refused to say when. The crisis in the countryside caused by foot

[Mr. Yeo]

and mouth disease cannot wait until politicians find time to consider the problems at their convenience. Thousands of businesses face imminent collapse, and many need cash help now. It is more than three months since we suggested that interest-free loans should be available to such businesses and repayable only when they return to profitability.

Ministers, whose salaries are paid regularly each month, do not always realise the agony of people whose businesses are running short of cash; they need help today. To back up the interest-free loans, we believe that further measures to increase rate relief are also required. Will the Secretary of State say why England will not match the measures already taken in Wales? Will she ensure that help is available in rural areas hit by the disease, even when those areas happen to fall inside urban local authorities? Will she set out as soon as possible the measures to be taken to deal with the new difficulties that will result from the ban on lamb and sheep exports? Will she announce the withdrawal of the Government's unworkable proposal for a 20-day ban on livestock movements? Will she introduce proposals for the recovery of the tourism industry, to help the livestock sector recover after the loss of valuable breeding stock and to assist other parts of the rural economy, including the important equestrian sector? Will we hear again soon from the rural task force, whose former chairman is, once again, absent from the Chamber?

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): The hon. Gentleman has just outlined a package of financial measures, which he would like to be put in place to assist the countryside. He has told us many times in recent weeks that his party could identify savings worth £8 billion in the Government's Budget. Why did he not propose putting that £8 billion into some of those measures, rather than proposing to spend on tax cuts the sum that he believed could be saved?

Mr. Yeo: I am sure that it will be a comfort to the Government Whips to tick off another box to show that one of the questions that they planted has been asked. [Interruption.] I am quite happy to answer the question because I set out my view many times before the general election. The answer is that we believe and hope that this epidemic is a one-off crisis. It is a proper use of the Government's contingency reserves to meet the costs of a one-off crisis. That is precisely the purpose of the reserves. The expenditure commitments that I have outlined, which are precisely those that I outlined before the general election and during the campaign, would be met by a claim on the reserves.

Thirdly, there is the need for additional compensation. Last Thursday, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs wrongly alleged that I advocated compensation for

"any unrecovered losses by anybody in any circumstances."—[Official Report, 21 June 2001; Vol. 370, c. 172.]

I have never suggested that, and I regret that the right hon. Lady distorted my comments. I remain concerned, however, about businesses that have suffered unrecoverable losses directly as a result of foot and mouth disease. I shall give the right hon. Lady an example.

Farmers whose cattle pass the age of 30 months experience a fall in the value of those animals that can never be recovered. Before foot and mouth disease, those animals would have been moved off the farms and sold. Given the foot and mouth disease restrictions in many parts of Britain, farmers were not able to sell the animals but received no compensation.

At the request of the previous Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, I set out on 5 April in a letter seven categories of loss caused by foot and mouth disease which the Opposition believe should be compensated for from public funds. Will the Secretary of State comment on the proposals in that letter? If she has not seen it, I suggest that she speaks to officials and asks for a copy of it. As eventually the Government have had to do nearly everything that the Opposition have suggested, she may find it helpful and a saving of time if she studies the proposals that we have already sent to her Department.

Will the right hon. Lady say whether she agrees with the response of the former Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 26 April on the specific issue of over-30-month old cattle? When she responds, will she say whether she expects the review to which the right hon. Gentleman referred to be completed?

The fourth aspect of the epidemic that I wish to highlight is vaccination. I think that the Secretary of State indicated on Radio 4 this morning that vaccination is once again under consideration. Why is that the case if the Government have made the progress in overcoming foot and mouth disease that the Prime Minister claimed? Setting aside the mystery of why an option that was examined as a possible solution when the crisis was at its peak should be reconsidered now, nearly two months after the Prime Minister said that the Government were in the home-straight, perhaps the Secretary of State will tell us what circumstances have changed to lead to the reconsideration.

Since the Government rejected vaccination in April, is there scientific evidence available that points to a new need for the process? Has the disease become endemic in some areas, or is it that with the election out of the way the Government are no longer afraid of the National Farmers Union? Will the right hon. Lady say what the purpose of vaccination now would be? Can she or her advisers answer the three questions that I have posed since March when vaccination was first seriously considered?

First, would vaccination reduce the number of animals that have to be slaughtered? Secondly, would it speed up eradication of the disease? Thirdly, would it bring forward the date on which Britain regains its disease-free status? I have asked these questions each time that vaccination has been discussed. I have said throughout that if the answer to at least two of these questions is yes, the Opposition will support vaccination, but I am still waiting for the answers.

I move on to the environmental issues. Yesterday's announcement, characteristically made by the Prime Minister outside Parliament, that the Government are to review energy policy raises the issue of climate change. Can we be clear who is now responsible for this area of policy? Is it the Secretary of State or is it the Deputy Prime Minister? Or has the Prime Minister abandoned hopes of achieving joined-up government and essentially decided on this issue, which so clearly has both domestic and international dimensions, to institutionalise muddle and possibly conflict within the Government ranks?

Is it the diplomatic skills for which the Deputy Prime Minister is so famous that qualify him to continue handling sensitive international negotiations? What steps do the Government propose to take to try to persuade the United States to respond more positively in the wake of its regrettable decision not to ratify the Kyoto agreement? What roles will the Secretary of State play, if any, in the Government's review of energy policy?

Will the Secretary of State confirm that Labour's dogmatic decision to block the construction of 15 new gas-fired power stations has had a damaging effect on the UK's carbon dioxide emissions, and that allowing those power stations to be built would have cut carbon dioxide emissions by almost three times more than the total included in the Government's package of energy taxes?

The Government's disregard for sustainability extends beyond their approach to climate change to the whole area of planning and development. It is sadly obvious that the way in which the new Department has been set up downgrades consideration of environmental concerns in planning decisions. For the first time for more than a generation, planning policy is now under the control of a Department that has no environmental remit at all.

Will the Secretary of State exercise any influence over planning policy and decisions in future? Does she recognise that current Government policy involves using up greenfield sites at an unsustainable rate? When will the Government stop ordering local councils to build thousands of houses on greenfield sites in defiance of local wishes? Is not it time to give local communities a bigger say in planning decisions?

Why is Labour using regional planning guidance to force more than half the regions in England to review the green belt? Has not Labour already destroyed enough of the green belt in the past four years, without inflicting even more damage? Does the Secretary of State understand that once they have been developed, the green belt and the greenfield sites outside the green belt never return to their previous uses, and that whole areas that once enjoyed silence during the day and darkness during the night are lost for ever? Does she recognise that giving the go-ahead to bulldoze yet more greenfield sites and to concrete over yet more of our green and pleasant land simply reduces the incentives for developers to tackle the urgent tasks of regenerating our run-down urban areas and of re-using more previously developed sites?

Labour's planning policy of environmental vandalism is not only disastrous for the countryside but hurts the towns by denying them the chance to benefit from the regeneration to which the private sector would undoubtedly devote more effort if Labour did not make it so easy for them just to develop greenfield sites.

The countryside is threatened not only by bulldozers. Peaceful areas such as the Stour valley in my constituency, part of the Dedham vale area of natural beauty which extends to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), are also threatened by noise pollution from aircraft. I recognise that new air routes may be needed as the number of flights increases, and that extra airport capacity is likely to be required, but the best way to make that environmentally acceptable is to encourage quieter aircraft. I wonder whether the Government have a strategy to that end.

Mr. Bercow: Given the frenetic spread of mobile telecommunications masts, often in worryingly close proximity to schools, homes and hospitals, would my hon. Friend care to say something about the desirable revision of planning policy guidance on that subject? Will he also agree with me that it is imperative that the Secretary of State should do so this afternoon?

Mr. Yeo: My hon. Friend raises a matter that is of great concern to people all over the country, particularly to many parents who are worried about the presence of, or proposal for, a mobile phone mast close to a school where their children are studying. The concern about these masts is widespread and very real, and I very much regret that the Government have been dragging their feet over toughening up the planning regime for them. Conservative Members have been making clear, strong proposals on this matter for a considerable period. I hope that the Government will lose no time in responding to these suggestions. Any delay in taking action by the Government will simply provoke greater anger in urban and rural areas, and may also increase the health risks that may result from badly sited mobile phone masts.

The Government's hostility to the countryside in the past four years has sadly not been confined to their neglect of agriculture. Resources have been systematically switched away from rural areas. Shire counties lost an estimated £700 million in funding in the previous Parliament, and Labour's reluctance to extend the limited reduction in business rates already introduced for some village shops, post offices and pubs threatens the survival of many businesses that are the life-blood of their rural communities. I urge the Secretary of State to take up another of our suggestions and cut another £1,000 off the business rate bills of vulnerable rural shops, post offices and garages.

The countryside is at risk from other threats. Labour's obsession with pressing ahead with genetically modified crops regardless of the environmental consequences could threaten Britain's wildlife and jeopardise the livelihood of many farmers. Will the Secretary of State give an unequivocal guarantee that no commercial planting of genetically modified crops will be permitted until their environmental impact is fully understood and advisers such as English Nature and others have confirmed that it is environmentally safe for such planting to take place? Will she also ensure that no genetically modified crop trials are authorised on sites within cross-pollination distances of organic farmland, and will the Government fulfil their obligations under the biosafety protocol to introduce liability legislation on damage that may arise from the environmental release of genetically modified organisms?

Finally, will the Secretary of State say whether, under the new Whitehall structure, she will chair the rural affairs Cabinet Sub-Committee? What will be the role in future of the rural advocate? Will the Government follow the practice of their predecessor and publish an annual update of the rural White Paper?

Time does not permit me to address various other issues such as animal welfare, biodiversity, fisheries and forestry, but I hope that they will soon be debated in the House.

[Mr. Yeo]

Labour's first term was one of missed opportunity environmentally, malign neglect of the crisis in agriculture and hostility to much of the countryside.

Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Yeo: No; it is too late.

The fact that the only reference in the Queen's Speech to rural issues is the promise to give time for yet another vote on banning hunting is a frightening indication of the Government's priorities for their second term. Now that the electorate have given Ministers a second chance, I urge them to use it to rebuild the rural economy, to support farming in the wake of the foot and mouth epidemic and to strengthen protection of the environment at home and lead the debate on the green agenda abroad. If they do those things, they will have the full support of myself and the Opposition. If they fail, they will be rightly condemned inside Parliament and outside it.

4.3 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): I shall be brief.

My Department's role in achieving sustainable development goes far beyond the rural environment. It covers the full range of environmental challenges, which are issues that affect the whole country. We have led the world in setting the strategy for a cut in greenhouse gas emissions. We have also legislated for greater protection for wildlife and landscapes and delivered cleaner rivers, beaches, air and drinking water. We shall continue to attempt to do that.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I have the greatest admiration for my right hon. Friend, but surely there must be some way in which we could allow one of her junior Ministers to read her text.

Margaret Beckett: I believe that that is the case. However, if it is possible for me to communicate with the House, I should prefer to do so. If my hon. Friend is telling me that she cannot hear what I am saying, that is a different matter.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I always hear every word.

Margaret Beckett: I shall endeavour to continue.

My Department will work with other Departments to ensure that sustainable development is at the heart of the Government's policy. It was clear from the remarks of the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) that he has little to say about rural areas and not much to say about the Opposition amendment. The only two things that he had to say were, first, to imply that had the Opposition become the Government, they would have done all the things that they failed to do in the 18 years when they had the chance and, secondly, that the tragedy of foot and mouth disease is not only the most devastating thing ever to befall the British countryside but, in some way, almost the fault of the Government.

The amendment regrets the Department's new name, although it reflects the widespread recognition that the future of agriculture is as part of the food chain and that sustainable agriculture is a key element in that chain.

The amendment and the hon. Gentleman's remarks illustrate the almost unbelievably selective memory of the Opposition. He referred to the need to protect the countryside from genetically modified organisms. The only people who have so far licensed GM foods were the Conservatives when in government. He demanded a commitment to a public inquiry into foot and mouth disease. That comes oddly from a party who steadfastly refused any kind of inquiry into the BSE crisis, which was certainly one of the worst disasters to befall this country and continues to overshadow agriculture today.

When the present outbreak of foot and mouth disease is over, the Government will want an inquiry into what took place. We will want it to be thorough but speedy; we will certainly not want it to be delayed or expensive.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I am glad that the Government will hold an inquiry. Will it take evidence from Cumbria, the worst affected area?

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which will be considered.

Just as BSE is only part of the legacy left to the Government by the Conservative party, so it is only part of the problem of the agricultural industry, let alone the wider rural community about which the hon. Member for South Suffolk said so little.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The Secretary of State said that we are less committed to the countryside than we might appear and that the Government are very much committed to it. Can she explain why there was no reference of any kind whatever in the Queen's Speech to agriculture, rural problems or the countryside, apart from a commitment to a free vote on the banning of foxhunting?

Margaret Beckett: The hon. Gentleman's timing is immaculate; I was about to come to precisely that point. The amendment claims that the Gracious Speech ignores the countryside, but its priorities are the improvement—including through legislative means—of education, health and crime, as well as of wider public services. They are just as important—perhaps even more so—in rural areas as elsewhere.

On average, between 1983 and 1997, 30 village schools closed each year. When the Conservatives left office, they left a third of all villages with no local shop. Nationwide, more than 3,000 post offices were closed and the Conservatives planned to privatise the rest. Britain spent less on rural development and green farming than any other EU country, except Spain and Greece, which were much poorer. By 1997, three parishes in four lacked a daily bus service of any kind.

Although the amendment calls for changes to planning policy

"to prevent excessive development on greenfield sites",

the Conservatives released 1,200 hectares of green belt land for development in their last year of office alone. What was that about all spin and no delivery?

In sharp contrast, let me highlight some of the things that the Government have done. We set up the BSE inquiry that the Conservatives shirked, but we also put our money where their mouth has usually been. Last year, only two village schools closed. Last September, we set up a £40 million small schools support fund to begin to raise standards in schools with fewer than 200 pupils. English shire counties received £447 million extra to raise school standards overall and to tackle repairs. We have already legislated to extend 50 per cent. mandatory rate relief to all village food shops, as well as to sole village pubs and petrol stations and to new, small-scale non-agricultural enterprises on farms. The Post Office is obliged to prevent closure of rural post offices unless it is absolutely unavoidable. We have set out a seven-year rural development programme costing £1.6 billion.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk asked me about reform of the common agricultural policy. That is not the subject of today's debate, but through modulation of the existing CAP scheme, we have again shown the direction in which we wish it to go. I refer to measures such as the rural enterprise scheme through which we can help farmers respond better to consumer requirements. We are also refocusing the support that we provide to hill farmers and have substantially increased the money available for agri-environment and farm woodland schemes. That is on top of providing short-term help in the agriculture industry as a whole.

Two thousand new or improved rural bus services have already been provided, and 30,000 hectares—an area three times the size of Bristol—have been added to the green belt. That is the record that the Conservative party seeks to deplore.

What of the future? We shall build on the rural White Paper with a programme of investment to support the improved public services that rural areas so desperately need. I shall chair the rural committee to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

Extra resources are being made available to continue help to small schools, with the target that all rural schools should be connected to the internet by 2002. We are investing £270 million to support the post office network and to offer new services through computerised links. We are committing an extra £100 million of public and private funding over the next three years for the renewal of market towns to make them the focus for economic regeneration. Ninety such towns have already been announced, and we expect a further 30 to follow.

Three thousand affordable homes a year are on their way and a £30 million police programme should help to cut rural crime. Some £239 million over three years will be invested to boost rural bus services, supporting dial-a-ride, taxi and car-sharing schemes, with a new £15 million parish fund for community-based solutions.

The whole of England can now access NHS Direct and in the new NHS plan, up to £100 million will go on improving general practitioner services. Improvements will include new mobile units, one-stop centres and tele-links to hospitals in 100 areas covering the majority of people in the countryside.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am grateful for the Secretary of State's visit to the Ribble valley yesterday to talk to farmers and those affected by foot and mouth in the tourism industry. She listened very carefully to what

they said. They asked her whether they would have a future in tourism or farming after foot and mouth is eradicated. She said that she did not have an open cheque book, but can we expect an announcement from her soon on a survival package for those involved in tourism and agriculture who have been blighted by foot and mouth?

Margaret Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that I listened very carefully to what was said yesterday. I have borne it in mind and will continue to do so. Work is in hand on a farm recovery plan and also on longer-term developments for the countryside for which, as he will appreciate, his constituents and others present called yesterday.

Mr. Bercow: I congratulate the Secretary of State warmly on her appointment and wish her success. Given the flow of imports into this country that satisfy neither the meat hygiene nor the animal welfare criteria that we rightly demand of our own produce, will she undertake to introduce new honesty in food labelling legislation so that consumers can know the country of origin and the method of production of food and thereby make a free and informed choice about what to buy?

Margaret Beckett: It was the Labour party that supported improved labelling for foodstuffs when the Conservative party opposed it. As for some of the specific requests of Conservative Members, not only have they been illegal since the previous Government signed up to an agreement under the Single European Act, but the National Farmers Union is on record as saying that they would be both illegal and counter-productive. This country has billions of pounds worth of exports from the food and drink industry, and the measures proposed by the hon. Gentleman and his party could jeopardise them. We will do everything that we can to protect British consumers, subject to the rule of law and to taking action that is not counter-productive.

Crucial in the context of rural services as a whole—is this a commitment that the Conservative party never even thought of giving—is the pledge in the rural White Paper to set a rural services standard. That will be a statement of what services rural people are entitled to expect and it will be independently audited every year. All major Government policies will be assessed for their impact on rural communities when they are drawn up. We shall set up national and regional rural sounding boards to give rural stakeholders a voice at the heart of government.

What all that shows—not in words from a party that had 18 years to deliver, but in concrete examples of delivery from this Government and concrete commitments to follow them up in future—is that we have laid out our commitment to investment and reform in rural areas as much, and perhaps even more so, than in the country as a whole.

Since being appointed to the new Department, with its crucial focus on sustainable development, which requires us to consider the economy, social issues and the environment together, everyone to whom I have listened in rural areas—not least in the farming community—has expressed a desperate desire for a renewal of hope, ambition and prosperity in Britain's countryside. The constituents of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) did so yesterday. That is not only an ambition

[Margaret Beckett]

and an aspiration that the Government share, but an aspiration that is at the heart of, and given expression to in the programme for, the Queen's Speech.

4.16 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I congratulate the Secretary of State on her appointment to the new Department and wish her well. I also congratulate her on contributing to the debate today despite her difficulties with her voice. I hope that she will be better soon. Despite the brevity of her contribution, she said rather more about her aspirations for the new Department than we heard in the Gracious Speech.

Many of us will have read with considerable interest the press release that the new Department put out on 14 June and will share the new Secretary of State's ambitions for her Department. In it she states:

"Our aim must be to enhance the quality of life through promoting: a better environment; thriving rural economies and communities; diversity and abundance of wildlife resources; a countryside for all to enjoy; and sustainable and diverse farming and food industries that work together to meet the needs of consumers."

I suspect that everyone in the Chamber would applaud those aims and wish the Secretary of State well in achieving them. They are fine words, but, sadly, the words in the Gracious Speech give us cause for considerable disappointment. There is little sign that the Government will do anything to put them into action, or of what the new Department is to do.

The Queen's Speech states that the Government are determined about

"Tackling climate change and making a reality of sustainable development".

As has been implied, however, the key issue is the Kyoto protocol, which we understand is to be left in the hands of the Deputy Prime Minister, so there will be no action for the new Department there. The only other relevant reference in the Queen's Speech is to the vote on hunting with dogs. As we all know, that is to be a free vote, so it is not an issue for the new Department.

The Secretary of State rightly pointed out that many other issues, such as the need to improve health, education and transport and the fight against crime, are as vital in rural as in urban areas. I agree, but her Department will not deal with those matters. We are pleased about the dismantling of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the establishment of the new Department, but what is it going to do?

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) rightly and properly mentioned farming. We know that the foot and mouth crisis has resulted in the slaughter of 5.5 million animals and the payment of £1 billion in compensation already. Sadly, we still hear of new cases almost daily. There was no reference to that crisis in the Gracious Speech or, more particularly, to any Government plans to set up a full and independent inquiry into foot and mouth and their handling of the crisis. The House and the country at large will want to know, for example, what impacts the common agricultural policy and the Government's management of the rural economy have had. What has been the impact of the gradual decline of the end-use price that farmers now receive on the way in which livestock is moved around the country, and on the spread of foot and mouth disease?

Only by means of a full inquiry, along the lines of the Phillips inquiry into BSE, will we discover what are the lessons that we urgently need to learn. I strongly urge the Secretary of State to say more than that there will be an inquiry: she must state categorically that it will be a full, independent and public inquiry, with the widest possible remit.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that there must be a full inquiry into the circumstances of the foot and mouth epidemic and its consequences for the wider economy. Does he agree that it should also examine how the disease was contained so effectively in those continental countries where outbreaks occurred, and why the containment of isolated cases in this country was so unsuccessful?

Mr. Foster: My hon. Friend is right. We need to look more widely into the matter. Indeed, I suspect that the inquiry should also look at how the rather different regime that exists in Scotland handled the crisis.

As he has done before, with the support of Liberal Democrat Members, the hon. Member for South Suffolk rightly raised the issue of consequential losses. He said that there was a need to look at the compensatory framework in relevant cases, and I very much agree with his remarks. The Government have already introduced a number of measures in connection with that matter, but they have not said for how long those measures will apply. Many people will be interested to know what the Government's plans are in that respect.

However, we hope that the new Department will look at other issues beyond the public inquiry into foot and mouth. Other hon. Members have already mentioned the protection of the green belt. We argue that the Government should look urgently at the possibility of introducing a greenfield development tax to make it more difficult to build on green fields. It is an obscenity that there are 150,000 homeless households in this country, and yet there are a staggering 750,000 empty houses. Before we start talking about building new houses on the green belt, we should look at measures to redress that ridiculous imbalance.

Mr. Gray: Corsham in my constituency is not far from the hon. Gentleman's constituency. The Government's proposal to build 850 houses on a brand-new greenfield site has been endorsed and permitted by the Liberal-Democrat controlled North Wiltshire district council. Does he agree with that or oppose it?

Mr. Foster: I do not know the full details of the case, so I shall not be drawn on that question. However, local authorities are being placed in a difficult position by the imposition of housebuilding targets by central Government. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will join me in trying to persuade the Government to change their approach. Local authorities should have a much greater say in setting such targets in their areas.

The Government should also consider a variety of other measures. For example, action should be taken to strengthen opportunities for farmers' markets in different parts of the country. That matter is especially close to my heart, as the first ever such market in this country was established in my constituency.

The Department should introduce measures to tackle the huge regulatory burden placed on people working in agriculture. Reference has been made already to the gold-plating of EU legislation, but other measures that need to be introduced include the establishment of one-stop shops where people working in agriculture can obtain information about the various farming support payments that are available. Perhaps the Government should also consider establishing a parliamentary ombudsman for those who work in agriculture.

The new Department also covers the crucial issue of the environment. The Labour Government have not shone on that issue in the past four years. They appointed Jonathon Porritt as their environmental adviser. In *The Daily Telegraph* on 16 October last year, he said:

"Anybody looking at it dispassionately is going to have a hard job proving that Labour has put the environment at the heart of Government, which is what they claimed they would do."

I hope that the new Secretary of State will do everything in her power to ensure that the environment truly is put at the heart of everything that the Government do.

In the past four years, under a Labour Government, the use of renewable energy has remained static at only 2 per cent. of the UK's primary energy, and targets to reduce soot and dust—the so-called PM10s—have been downgraded. In rural areas, air pollution is now at its worst for 10 years. Plans to tackle fuel poverty have been downgraded by the simple expedient of changing the definition. One million households have allegedly been taken out of fuel poverty by that means.

Under a Labour Government, we have had one of the lowest recycling rates in the EU. Sadly, even plans to reduce car use and increase cycling have been downgraded. It has not been a happy record. The Government could do a lot. They could take measures to boost recycling, make greater use of renewable sources of energy and increase the penalties on polluters. As the hon. Member for South Suffolk said, the Government could introduce rules of corporate environmental responsibility.

I agree that the Government need to take action not only in this country but elsewhere, not least in respect of the recent decision by President Bush on the Kyoto protocol. He has thrown down the gauntlet on action to deal with climate change. It is one thing to seek renegotiation of the protocol; it is another to repudiate it in the way that he has. I hope that the Government will recognise that it is debatable whether President Bush has a mandate for the line that he has taken. It is certainly debatable whether in the medium term the American economy can be sustained unless action is taken to minimise energy use. I hope that the Secretary of State and, even more important, the Prime Minister, will take the lead with our European partners in putting pressure on President Bush to rethink his disastrous decision.

It was a great disappointment that there was little evidence that the Prime Minister talked to President Bush about the Kyoto protocol during the summit last week when he had the opportunity to do so.

Geraint Davies: I have listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman. Does he agree that the Deputy Prime Minister was a key player in the original protocol? Does he recognise that the fiscal incentives that we have introduced to encourage people to use smaller cars and the tax that we impose on petrol put us in a leading role

in the environmental agenda relative to other EU countries? Does he accept that in those terms a great deal of progress has been made?

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman challenges me on several issues. I welcome the contribution that the Deputy Prime Minister has made, although I remind the hon. Gentleman that the right hon. Gentleman's negotiating skills, especially with his French counterpart, could be called into question. We are perhaps sitting on our laurels in respect of our success in meeting the targets set by the Kyoto protocol. The results of an independent analysis of Government action suggest that we have much more to do, and that many of our successes so far have resulted from policies adopted, perhaps inadvertently, by the previous Government, especially in respect of the so-called dash for gas. Bearing in mind some of the plans that the Government have had to reduce growth in the use—and indeed to reduce the absolute use—of motor vehicles, I question whether the Government have been remotely as successful as the hon. Gentleman suggested.

That brings me neatly to the other topic for debate today: transport. Here, too, we have a new Government Department, with a new Secretary of State. On 18 June, the new Secretary of State said—again I quote from the Department's press release—

"Transport is at the top of the Government's agenda and we are determined to deliver a better transport system".

A better system is certainly needed, but it is a great pity, given that this is apparently at the top of the Government's agenda, that there was no mention of transport in the Gracious Speech. The new Secretary of State rightly says that we need a better transport system, but there is no suggestion that he will take any action to help achieve it.

I suspect that all in the Chamber would agree that the public transport system is a shambles and that, even for those who rely on their cars, there is now increased congestion and delay. The one thing that we now know above all is that that congestion and delay is costing this country dear. The Confederation of British Industry estimates that congestion on our roads costs British businesses some £20 billion a year. Our doctors tell us that the resultant pollution brings forward thousands of deaths every year. Ridiculously, it was possible to get around a Victorian city more quickly in a horse and cart than it is to get around a modern city in a modern motor car.

Even for those who rely on their motor cars, as some, particularly in rural areas, sadly must, the situation is not good. We shall persuade more people out of their cars only if we have a better public transport system. Yet it is a Labour Government who, over the past four years, spent less Government money on public transport than even the previous Conservative Government were spending on it.

To take as an example the shambles on our railways, it is no wonder that passengers feel that the Strategic Rail Authority cannot work out a strategy, that Railtrack cannot run a railway and that even the Deputy Prime Minister could not work out who to blame next.

I believe that many, although not all, in the House would agree that the shambolic state of our railways was shaped by the Tories' disastrous rail privatisation, which led to an unwieldy, fragmented structure, with hundreds of different parts all competing with one another. It was

[Mr. Foster]

a recipe for the chaos that ensued, and in part led to the tragedies of the Paddington and Hatfield rail crashes, and the absolute obscenity of Mr. Gerald Corbett, the former chief executive of Railtrack, being offered a golden goodbye of £1.3 million, despite his admission that both he and Railtrack had failed.

Sadly, the new Secretary of State has said that he has no plans for any structural changes within the railway, yet structural change is now urgently needed. I do not support the calls from many people for renationalisation because I recognise that bringing back Railtrack alone would cost billions of pounds—money that I truly believe should be used not to line shareholders' pockets but to invest in improving our railways.

Some changes could be made. Parts of Railtrack—those directly responsible for the running of the railways—are run as a monopoly. It is not right in a monopoly to have a conflict between shareholder profit and passenger safety. We should restructure those parts of Railtrack that relate to the running of the railways, as distinct from its property management portfolio activities, and turn them into a not-for-profit public interest company.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he would leave Railtrack as a private company in charge of all the property side and leave the taxpayer to bear the burden of all the work that has to be done on maintenance and improving the railway?

Mr. Foster: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, for whom I have great respect as Chairman of the Transport Sub-Committee. No, I am not saying that. She will be well aware that Railtrack has assets that have no direct connection with the railways, such as buildings in the centre of major cities and so on. I am referring to those properties and their management, as distinct from the properties and activities that directly relate to running the railways. [Interruption.] I am glad to see, from the movement of the hon. Lady's hand, that I am already beginning to bring her round a little.

The hon. Lady will be aware that her Committee has been critical of the way in which our railways operate. On other aspects of transport—National Air Traffic Services, for example—she and her Committee have advocated a model similar to my proposal for Railtrack.

On restructuring, the new Secretary of State could go even further. For example, to reduce the number of elements in our railway system, he could reduce the number of franchises. He could also allow more of the train operating companies to take responsibility for maintaining the track on which their trains run. Rather than the perverse system under which 300 people are employed to work out delay attribution, he could introduce a completely new system giving incentives to train operators. At any one time, 60 people are sat down working out who is to blame for any one train delay. That is nonsensical.

Many, many changes need to be made and I urge the new Secretary of State in the new Department to reconsider his statement that he has no plans for structural changes to our railway.

Geraint Davies: On the hon. Gentleman's comparison with the NATS model, is he advocating that the Railtrack

model should be a public-private partnership with the train operating companies and the Government forming elements of that partnership? Would not that be an equivalent?

Mr. Foster: Again, the hon. Gentleman takes me down paths that I do not want to follow at great length. He will remember the lengthy debate about NATS and the plans for part privatisation, which were vigorously opposed from these Benches and by more than 100 Labour Members, airline pilots, trade unions and others. For those parts of Railtrack that are directly related to running the railways, I advocate a model similar to that proposed for NATS by the Select Committee.

Adopting such a model, which would involve a not-for-profit public interest company, would enable that company to raise money through bonds and there is now a much greater likelihood that that model would attract additional private sector finance. Many Members are well aware of the difficulties that Railtrack is experiencing. It is unable to attract private sector investment, its credit rating has plummeted and it is having problems bringing in additional private sector money, although the Government's 10-year transport plan depends on that significantly. Therefore, the model that I propose would help the Government to achieve their desire to have £60 billion invested in the railways, which is much needed, including the split that they propose.

The hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Geraint Davies) must be aware of the ludicrous situations that have arisen over the past couple of months. Railtrack has constantly come cap in hand to the Government to ask for yet more money and for payment of money that it would receive in due course to be brought forward. The sad truth is that money that taxpayers have handed over will be used to pay shareholders' profits and the golden goodbye to Gerald Corbett. That is not how I want taxpayers' money to be used.

The word has gone out that civil servants in the new Department are referring to it by the acronym DETOL. I simply say to the new Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions that our transport system needs far more than sticking plaster and DETOL if we are to put it right. A lot more needs urgently to be done.

The creation of two new Departments and the appointment of two new Secretaries of State has already been mentioned. But that in itself will not do much to address the many concerns of people in our rural communities about the environment and the need to create a safe, reliable and affordable public transport system.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: No, I shall not.

Urgent action is needed from the two new Departments. Sadly, from the contents of the Gracious Speech, it looks as if we might be in for a big disappointment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Before I call the next speaker, I must inform the House that Mr. Speaker's decision to impose a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches now applies.

4.40 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I recall my beloved mother telling me of a crooner in the 1930s who was known as "the whispering singer". I never understood the advantage or attraction of such a performance, but having listened to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, I realise that it may have had a quality of its own, not usually heard in the human voice. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her sterling performance.

The Queen's Speech is a clear indication of the fact that the Government have been given not only a positive mandate, but a series of instructions. The general election proved conclusively that the electorate do not want Her Majesty's loyal Opposition back in charge: they have too many uncomfortable memories of what happened when they were in government. The electorate know that many fundamental services are sadly in need of renewal, development and improvement, and they decided that a Labour Government with a large majority would be capable of delivering the level of service that they want. That is what we expect of the Government.

At long last, legislation has been placed on the statute book to create the Strategic Rail Authority and support rural transport such as buses. Those measures can be used to transform the situation for the average person. The normal passenger does not want to stand on an unstaffed, dirty station wondering whether they are safe while they wait for a train which, if it arrives at all, will probably be late and filthy, with lavatories that are virtually unusable. Normal passengers want to know that they will have sufficient services to get them to work on time. They need bus services that meet train services and they want better facilities such as proper bus stations, in addition to fully staffed services, so that they can use those constant and vital parts of the public services in the most efficient and comfortable way.

If the Government are to deliver that, they face many difficult and sharp problems and they need to take some hard decisions. An incoming Minister needs to consider the Strategic Rail Authority. I am second to none in my admiration for Alistair Morton, but in the two years of its existence, the authority has delivered neither the agenda nor the decisions that are needed. In spite of the appalling accidents that have caused so much uproar in the railway industry, it is clear that the train operating companies and Railtrack have yet to address the difficulties that make it impossible for the average passenger to receive the level of care that he or she needs.

Why is it, in this day and age, that almost as soon as the train operating companies got over the trauma of what happened at Hatfield, they started to squabble among themselves? Why is it that Railtrack seems incapable of taking a major decision that will have an impact on the services or produce high-quality care and safety? Why is it that we reward very inadequate management on the basis that the previous general executive of Railtrack was rewarded for failing at his job? I would be happy to leave Parliament tomorrow with the same compensation that was handed out to Mr. Gerald Corbett, if failing in one's job is all that is required, but I see no obvious way in which I can demonstrate how incompetent I am. Having looked at what people get paid for these days, it is no wonder that there is real disillusion and disappointment among the general public about what is happening in our transport services.

I want to address two narrow points. Because of the length of time that it will take to have an impact on the transport system, great and immediate action must be taken on the control of the Strategic Rail Authority and the direction in which it is going. The train operating companies must be told that they will not be given franchises unless they guarantee high standards for the passenger. The passenger must come first, and it is about time that we said that over and over again.

Above all, Railtrack must cede many of its responsibilities. It is no use saying, "We don't want restructuring" and then saying, "Oh yes, we would like them to do this, but to keep that." We are talking about a private monopoly company, not a state company, and it does not do the job that it was set up to do. It appears incapable at director level of understanding that it is a railway company. It still has only one engineering director. It does not have an in-house engineering inspection department and, in many instances, it is incapable of insisting that its contractors comply with the terms and conditions laid down in their contracts. That cannot be acceptable. None of us would accept that quality of work in our own homes, so why do we accept it within the public services?

There is another matter that is dear to my heart. The Government had better sort out their attitude towards the mix of private finance and public funds. Railtrack is a classic example of how we hand over vast amounts of assets to private companies which then fail disastrously to provide what they have undertaken to provide. The Government had better think hard about that. If there is any suggestion that private companies with a legal commitment to make a profit for their shareholders will be brought in to run the NHS, I believe that the public are ahead of us in rejecting the idea. That is not the way to do it. It is not the way to provide high-quality clinical services or anything else.

Look at the private hospitals built alongside NHS units. Look at what they charge the NHS for the provision of services. Look at the poor standard of care that is still only too acceptable. At the weekend, some very nice ladies told me what they want from the local county social services for the care of the elderly in my constituency. Their complaint was simple. They said, "It's appalling. The Government are going to require providers to pay the national minimum wage. We will have to increase our wages bill." They will have to pay £4.10 an hour to people who have responsibility for the elderly in Britain. I do not regard that as acceptable; indeed, in this day and age, I do not regard it as defensible.

I will not support Government moves that lead Britain away from a national health service provided by people committed to public care, towards a service that is far too frequently looked upon by private health companies and insurance companies as a way of making massive profits. We have seen what that means in the transport industry. We saw what happened when companies such as British Rail Engineering were sold. Managers were brought in and told to run the company but they were incapable of doing what they had been asked to do. Private firms came in and asset-stripped entire companies. As always happens in such cases, the British public were left with the worst deal, paying all the bills, not getting the services and finding that it was unacceptable to question loudly what was happening. Many members of my family have been wholly committed to the NHS. I have never received

[Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody]

private care because I have strong views on the quality of clinical care provided in the private industry—and it is an industry.

I say this to the Government: I expect results in the transport industry and I expect the national health service to benefit from large sums of taxpayers' money and to achieve high clinical standards of care. I do not expect a Labour Government in any circumstances to treat the workers in the national health service in the same way as workers in the transport system have been treated in the recent past. I see no hope of the Government getting support from many members of the Labour party if that is their intention.

4.50 pm

Mr. Peter Duncan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): It is with a sense of enormous honour and no small degree of humility that I rise to present my maiden address following my election success in the constituency of Galloway and Upper Nithsdale. It is a privilege to follow the right hon. and hon. Members who have already spoken with great passion and ability in the debate on the Gracious Speech. My ambition is to prove, in the months and years to come, a willing ambassador and representative for my constituents, while paying due regard to the traditions and respect accumulated by the House over the centuries.

My constituency and its boundary-changed predecessors have been well represented in the past by some exceptionally able Members of Parliament, who have gained great respect on both sides of the House. Most recently, Mr. Alasdair Morgan was an eloquent and forceful advocate for the region and for Scotland as a whole during his term as Member of Parliament for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale between 1997 and the recent Dissolution. Although we may have disagreed about Scotland's place in the United Kingdom, Mr. Morgan was in all senses an honourable Member who set new standards in terms of being accessible to his constituents. I have spoken to many residents of the three counties encompassed by my constituency and have yet to speak to one who does not acknowledge the open and able way in which Mr. Morgan represented them. One of the most important aspects of party politics is to recognise quality on both sides of the House: Alasdair Morgan served us well.

Prior to Alasdair Morgan's arrival, between 1979 and 1997, the noble Lord Lang of Monkton was Member of Parliament for Galloway, and then for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale. The Chamber has seen many exceptional talents in its long history, and Lord Lang was surely one of its most eloquent; he now brings his talents to bear on proceedings in another place. He served the House well throughout his time as Secretary of State for Scotland and as President of the Board of Trade and during his spells at the Department of Trade and Industry and the Scottish Office. During that time, by common consent, he never lost sight of his role as a constituency Member of Parliament and he was a forceful advocate for my region. They are big shoes to fill.

Galloway and Upper Nithsdale is a constituency that is rightly described as "Scotland in miniature"—although the fact that it covers more than 1,500 square miles means that "miniature" may well not be the most appropriate

adjective. It encompasses the three principal counties of Wigtownshire, Kirkcudbrightshire and part of Dumfriesshire covering upper, mid and lower Nithsdale. From the burgh boundary of Dumfries, it stretches westward to the busy port of Stranraer and northwards up the Nith valley to Kirkcubright and the Ayrshire border.

The tourism and farming industries are the bedrock of the local economy, based around the small market towns of Castle Douglas and Newton Stewart. My constituency, by common consent, is host to some of the finest dairy herds in the UK and some of the most expansive upland hill sheep farms. Our pedigree farm stock includes the world-famous belted Galloway, to whose profile this particular new Member's has somewhat cruelly been compared.

Our tourism market has suffered greatly from the foot and mouth crisis that has gripped our region, like so many others, but we look forward to welcoming old friends and new to treasures such as the Scottish national book town at Wigtown, the fishing port at Kirkcudbright and the rugged scenery of upper and mid-Nithsdale, with its mining towns and small communities dependent on fishing, field sports and walking tourism.

As you will be aware Mr. Deputy Speaker, the climate in Scotland is not always the most clement. I am happy to reassure the House that the subtropical climate of the gardens of Galloway remains a huge draw for visitors, no doubt aware that the Mull of Galloway is further south than Hartlepool. The climate and the gulf stream have created a corner of Scotland where palm trees happily co-exist with the Scots pine.

The rural communities scattered across that half of Dumfries and Galloway are a delight to the visitor, but a challenge to maintain. I am sure that all hon. Members would support the view that Scotland's diversity is its attraction. Part of that diversity lies in its sparse population in rural areas. I am well aware of my obligation to play my part in sustaining those rural communities. Too often, families are separated far too early when offspring have to leave to find work or to further their education. We must find a way to keep those communities together by encouraging sustainable development and long-lasting rural and family communities that work.

This is an important time to represent Galloway and Upper Nithsdale. The challenge to create viable long-term communities has been made all the more critical by the arrival of foot and mouth disease earlier this year. Following its spread across the constituency, the sense of emptiness is in places palpable. Farmyards lie empty, fields lie overgrown and auction marts that were for so long the social centre of rural Britain lie sadly dormant.

Given that mine is a constituency in which farming and tourism are the major employers, the House will understand that foot and mouth has ripped the heart from Galloway. The worry, the despair and the torment have been unimaginable. We must all hope that the progress against the disease can be maintained, and that life can return to some degree of normality as soon as possible.

Mr. Speaker, you will be aware that my particular accent has not emanated much from the Conservative Benches in recent times. I am happy to be the advance party for others who will surely follow, and in the meantime I will make a habit of providing simultaneous translation for those who require it. It remains important that this House be a meeting place for all opinions the

length and breadth of the United Kingdom. I am delighted to be the one to return the Scottish Conservative and Unionist tradition to the Floor of the Chamber and I look forward with relish to my time ahead.

I look forward to representing in this House a beautiful and unique part of the United Kingdom. I feel passionate, as hon. Members I hope will have understood, about the particular needs and views of my constituency. I look forward to playing my small part in moving the region forward.

4.58 pm

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): It is a delight to follow the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Duncan). He follows a long line of distinguished hon. Members representing that constituency. I found his speech very entertaining, although it contained a sombre note because, like mine, his constituency has been struck with the dread contagion of foot and mouth disease. He said that he was an ambassador for his constituency. He carries a heavy burden because, for the Conservative party, he is an ambassador for the whole of Scotland. I suspect that there will continue to be a small advance party after the next general election, but I wish him well.

I want to confine my remarks to foot and mouth disease. My constituency of Pendle has now been touched by the disease; it struck just after the general election. Before then, it was held in the so-called Settle-Clitheroe rectangle. The A59 was the firebreak. We were all keeping our fingers crossed that the disease could be contained on the Ribble valley side, but, on 9, 10 and 11 June, that firebreak was breached and three infected farms and 16 contiguous farms were culled out. Those farms lie in a horseshoe around Barnoldswick, the town where I live. Five further farms have been culled out—the farms contiguous with infected farms that lie outside the Pendle boundary. We have also had dangerous contact cases in Barrowford, as well as near Colne, but fortunately there have been no funeral pyres. All the animals have been taken away because the rendering capacity now exists, and people have been spared the torment of the black smoke and the odours of animals being burnt in those dreadful pyres.

Feelings have been running high in my constituency. Many accusing fingers have been pointed at the Government and others. I was gratified to learn that the Secretary of State had accepted an invitation from the hon. Member for Ribbles Valley (Mr. Evans) to meet farmers at Gisburn. Yesterday, I took some farmers from the Pendle area to meet the Secretary of State, and they told me afterwards that she had handled the meeting very well. There was a lot of praise for her straightforward handling of the questions and she impressed the farmers, but some of the concerns that came out of the meeting still have to be addressed by the Government full square.

At the centre of the concerns was whether British farming had a future after the disease had finally been stamped out. If the farmers take the compensation and restock, will there be a cap on numbers? Several farmers said that the 20-day movement ban would kill the industry. I do not know what the answer is if we want to prevent foot and mouth taking hold and spreading again, but there were real concerns about that. There were concerns about foot and mouth being endemic in the deer population, and I know that the Minister will want to comment on that in the winding-up speech.

Concerns were expressed by people in the agricultural supply industry whose businesses were reeling. The number of bad debts in farming made it very difficult for the people who supply the farmers to carry on. It was suggested that people in the agricultural supply business could do some of the work that former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food officials are doing at present in advising farmers, on disinfecting, and so on.

There was much concern that compensation was not reaching farmers quickly enough. That is clearly critical, because farmers, like the rest of us, cannot survive on fresh air, and they need to know when they will get their money. That is not an exhaustive list of the issues that the farmers raised, and there was an expectation that an inquiry will take place.

It sticks in my throat when I hear the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), who speaks for the Conservative party, banging on about an inquiry, given that it took the Labour Government to hold an inquiry into BSE. Why could the Conservatives not have held an inquiry into BSE during their long period in office? They had to wait for us to win the 1997 election to have an inquiry. However, I do not want any inquiry to be like the Phillips inquiry, which took two years to complete. It would take a week to read the entire Phillips report, which runs to 15 volumes. Life is too short for that; I want an inquiry that will be focused, that will not take for ever and that will supply the answers to some of the questions that have been posed.

Outside the meeting, farmers also expressed other concerns, which, for reasons best known to them, they did not raise directly with the Secretary of State. Some people were anxious that the vets themselves may have spread the disease—I do not know the answer to that. Another criticism was that vets with a background outside farming were brought in from overseas. A farmer told me that a vet from Florida who did nothing but treat exotic animals came over to deal with foot and mouth disease.

This is a case in which the Government are damned if they do and damned if they don't. The state veterinary service had 220 vets, which was clearly not enough. We needed to bring vets in to deal with the outbreak, and the number increased to 750 or 800 vets. Clearly, there is always someone who is prepared to mock or sneer and say that the vets brought in did not have a perfect command of English or whatever, but the important factor was that the vets could identify the disease and recommend the proper action to take.

There were concerns about lorry loads of carcasses being removed from the infected area in Pendle along country roads through areas that were not infected. I am not aware of the logistics involved in getting the animals to the renderers, and I invite the Minister to comment on that.

There was a separate meeting about the state of the rural economy. I was told—it is a shocking statistic—that £1.2 billion was lost to the north-west economy as a result of foot and mouth disease. I, and many others, are still waiting for the list of successful towns that bid for help under the market towns initiative. That information should have been made available on 12 June, and I am still waiting.

There are many angry people in Pendle who have pressed the case for vaccination. They set up a small group, the Heart of Britain foot and mouth action group,

[Mr. Gordon Prentice]

which managed to persuade Pendle borough council to back a resolution calling for the introduction of protective vaccination in areas immediately threatened by the disease, and mass vaccination in areas that rely on tourism. That could mean the entire country outside urban areas. It seems that the question has not been properly thought through. I agree with the Government's position, which is that vaccination should be held in reserve. It is possible to vaccinate rapidly if the situation becomes completely out of control.

I advise those who have written to me about these matters to refer to the remarks of Jim Scudamore, the chief vet, in his contribution to the inquiry undertaken in the last Parliament by the Select Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. On 21 March, Mr. Scudamore persuasively set out the arguments for vaccination, as well as the huge downside involved in taking that route.

The Liberal Democrats' policy should be put on the record. At a public meeting in my constituency, the Liberal Democrats gave people the impression that their party's position was to vaccinate everything that moved in the farmyard. That was not the position. On 14 June, the hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats on these issues, said that it was not the time to move away from slaughter and disposal.

How extensive is the foot and mouth epidemic? I have only two more minutes. Many think that it is endemic in the upland sheep and the deer populations. During the BBC's "World at One" on 12 June it was reported that MAFF had referred to a programme of testing upland sheep. Of the 60,000 sheep tested, it was found that 15,000 were carrying the foot and mouth antibody. I should like—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's time is up.

5.9 pm

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): I am delighted to be the first Conservative Member to be able to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Duncan) on his maiden speech. It was a pleasure to hear a good Scottish accent on the Opposition Benches—my mother is half Scottish—and one that I could understand. There was no need for translation.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) made a typically eloquent and forceful contribution to the debate. Perhaps that is not a genuine compliment because I know that he is not standing for leadership of the Conservative party.

Mr. Yeo: There is time yet.

Mr. Horam: Indeed.

I agreed with my hon. Friend when he said that he was pleased that the Gracious Speech included a reference to tackling climate change and making a reality of sustainable development. I am strongly of that view. If the Government really wish to take that approach, after making their declaration in the Gracious Speech, they could reincarnate the Select Committee on the Environmental Audit. I see two distinguished Labour

Members who were members of that Committee, but I do not think that any Opposition Members present in the Chamber sat on it. Were it in existence, we would be harrying them, as much as we did in the previous Parliament, to commit themselves to tackling climate change, to making a reality of sustainable development and to making those issues the heart of their policy in government.

As a matter of fact, by a peculiar quirk of our procedures, there is no impediment to that Committee being set up immediately. Unlike all other Select Committees, apart from the Public Accounts Committee, we do not have to be set up by the Committee of Selection. The Whips could get together and reach an agreement today to reincarnate the Committee, and I have mentioned this to a Government Whip and to the Whip who is talking away on my own Front Bench, my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson). Let us get on with that, so that we can have a real debate about sustainable development instead of the good but token remarks in the Gracious Speech.

Obviously, the main theme of the Gracious Speech—or perhaps I should say the main priority; we are getting into semantics here, but I understand the difficulty that the Government are in—is improvement in our public services. Few of us would quarrel with that—it was certainly the theme of the general election—and that applies across all the public services, including the police, health, schools or whatever.

I want to concentrate on transport and to drag the debate away, if I may, from the concerns of the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), who rightly spoke about agriculture, BSE and so forth. I want to concentrate on my own concerns as the Member for Orpington and a Member for our great capital city. Transport is a real problem in the capital city today. Many of my constituents commute into London to come to work. Indeed, many of them work at the House of Commons and I know of the problems first hand, because they complain to me regularly about the nature of the commuter services that they have to undergo daily.

First, commuters have to get to the station and find a car park; the buses are not always reliable. The trains are often late when they get there, as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) mentioned. A recent commuter watch by the *Evening Standard* found that 25 per cent. of the trains going from Orpington to central London on the Connex South Eastern line were late. When commuters get on the trains, they habitually find them overcrowded.

Overcrowding is the problem that people complain about most often in my constituency. Indeed, some of the staff members here have complained that, in this hot weather, they have almost fainted while going home after a day's work in the House of Commons. The fact that they are packed, like sardines, into an overheated old carriage makes me wonder about safety. If something went wrong, what would happen? That is clearly on people's minds since the recent accidents, which we are all very sad about.

When commuters get to London, they have to face the underground, where the gates are frequently closed because no more people can be accommodated on the platforms. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has said of facing the horror of an

evening's journey home in temperatures of 90 deg F that it would not happen to animals. Human beings should not be allowed to be carried in that fashion legally.

There are huge problems. It is not only that the present situation is so bad. There is also very little light at the end of the tunnel, which itself seems a long way off. Even Ken Livingstone, the Mayor, said the other day that it would be at least five years after the next election for Mayor—fortunately for him—before we should see any significant improvements in transport in London. Similarly, Sir Alastair Morton said only yesterday, I think, that it would be at least five years before we saw any major improvements in the railways. That is a very long way off when one is sitting in a packed train going to work.

I remind the House that London is the great engine of economic growth, and we cannot afford to have more dispirited people turning up for work. I look to the Minister to say something about how the situation on my own commuter line can be improved. I want practical measures to be introduced, for example, to deal with the problems of overcrowding. There should be some reasonably affordable short-term solutions, such as platform lengthening, signalling replacement, and dealing with bottlenecks such as the infamous Borough market junction, which could lead to some improvement to the commuter line that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) and I share. Such measures would allow people to carry on with some hope that something will happen, not just in the long-distant future, five or 10 years from now, but in the foreseeable future.

The beginning of a Parliament is a good time not only to think of immediate concerns of that kind—important though they are, to my constituents—but to stand back and examine the Government's approach. It is essential, in relation to the new Departments in particular—whose creation at least shows a recognition of the need for a fresh Government approach—that there should be clear thinking and clear-cut decisions. In that respect, I welcome the report from the Institute for Public Policy Research—not a Conservative think-tank, but one that is more oriented towards new Labour—which had some sensible things to say. In particular, it made the point that we should drop the dogma. How often have we exchanged dogmatic views of "public right, private wrong" or "private right, public wrong" across the Chamber or in a general election? We have had our fill of such exchanges in the past few weeks and should try in the interests of our constituents to drop as many of them as possible. We should also recognise that different solutions are appropriate in different circumstances.

I certainly recognise that the Government's transport inheritance from their predecessor was not perfect. The privatisation of the railways, for example, was overcomplex and made a signal error—sorry about the pun—by splitting track management from train operations, organisation and management. My view is not that of hindsight; to the horror of the then Government Whips, I expressed it on Second Reading of the Railways Act 1993. I have always felt that that separation was a fundamental error in our privatisation plan.

Nevertheless, privatisation has some advantages, an important one being that, to some extent, it has removed the Treasury's dead hand from investment. It has also made the railways more customer oriented.

I therefore accept that, because of their transport inheritance, the Government have been constrained in their transport decisions. However, despite all its obvious faults, Ministers have undoubtedly made matters worse by dumping all the blame on Railtrack after the recent accidents. Consequently, Railtrack is now not the vehicle for raising private capital that it was originally envisaged to be. That is a serious problem for those trying to attract extra investment to the railways rapidly, so as to give relief to constituents such as mine.

The Government have a serious choice to make about whether they are going to support Railtrack, so that its share price increases and it is able to attract investment and private capital, or whether—as the hon. Members for Bath (Mr. Foster) and for Crewe and Nantwich were saying—to restructure Railtrack. I would not be averse to the latter option. Railtrack is so subsidised by taxpayers' money that there is case for saying that we should take the equity for that and thereby make Railtrack effectively a renationalised company.

Subsequently, bits of Railtrack could be leased out to the operating companies and management of the operating companies could be reintegrated with management of the rails. We might then have a sensible and less complicated system. It would be a fitting finale if we called the new organisation the British railways board, as Simon Jenkins humorously suggested the other day. That is the type of process that we need.

The Government have only themselves to blame on the underground; they cannot blame their predecessors. Ministers not only created the underground public-private partnership of their own volition, they recreated all the mistakes that had been made in the Conservative Government's privatisation of the railways. The PPP is too complex. Even Bob Kiley says that he cannot understand it, and I should think that he has studied it far more than anyone else has. It also envisages splitting rail from track as happened in the railways privatisation.

The Government have some clear decisions to make on the underground. Should they—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's 10 minutes are up.

5.18 pm

Ms Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley): As I represent part of the city of Sheffield, hon. Members may be surprised to see me speaking in a debate on the Queen's Speech that is focused on rural issues. Hon. Members who have not visited the constituency of Sheffield, Heeley may not appreciate how green it is and how many of my constituents take a keen interest in rural affairs. However, I am sure that hon. Members will know that Sheffield, like Rome, is built on seven hills and that Heeley has its fair share of them. They afford residents some of the most magnificent views of the city and of the beautiful Derbyshire borders that are at the southern boundary of my constituency.

The constituency also boasts a farm, Heeley city farm, which not only has animals, but which offers work training, education and various community enterprises, all of which are seeking to work in an environmentally friendly manner.

It is a particular privilege for me to represent Sheffield, Heeley, as it is the area where I grew up and where I first joined the Labour party. I am only the third Labour

[Ms Meg Munn]

Member for the constituency and have the distinction of knowing both previous Labour Members. The seat was first won for Labour in 1966, when my father was the election agent. I know that many people still remember the then Member, whose name made him an ideal candidate. In these more cynical days, it would perhaps be thought of as a deliberate ploy to select Frank Hooley, with "Hooley for Heeley" providing an easy and memorable slogan.

By the time of the 1970 election, with a father and uncle as councillors in Sheffield, I had already developed an interest in politics and took to debating the case for Labour with my school friends. A permanent reminder is my school photo of that year, in which I can be seen proudly wearing my "Hooley for Heeley" sticker. It was, however, to be an early lesson in losing; the Conservative candidate won that year, with a narrow majority of 713. Four years later, Frank Hooley was re-elected and served the people of Heeley as an excellent constituency Member until 1983.

In that year Bill Michie was elected, continuing as Member of Parliament until his retirement at this general election. I also first knew Bill when I was a child. My earliest memory is from a time when he was standing for the local council when I spent a morning with my sister making red rosettes in the campaign room. However, I cannot claim to have made the rosette which he still wears to this day, prominently sporting an "Old Labour and proud of it" sticker.

In his maiden speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Kevin Brennan) highlighted the physical differences between himself and his predecessor. I, too, claim differences from mine, and not just differences of gender. Robert Waller and Byron Criddle, in their "Almanac of British Politics", described Bill Michie as follows:

"With a style of beard and intensity of manner redolent of the English Civil War, he is one of the PLP's irreducible hard left core."

In a national newspaper during the election, I was described as

"strapping with a pleasant toothy smile."

It could have been worse. They have yet to pronounce on my political views.

Since my selection as Labour candidate for Sheffield, Heeley in July last year, I have been involved in campaigns in the constituency. On many occasions, people have told me of the work that Bill Michie did for them. Organisations have spoken highly of his contribution in supporting their aims and assisting them wherever possible. I pay tribute to his 18 years as the representative for the constituency.

Not only am I the third Labour Member of Parliament for Sheffield, Heeley, I am also the third Labour Co-operative Member for a constituency in Sheffield. The first was A. V. Alexander, subsequently Lord Alexander, who represented the constituency of Sheffield, Hillsborough. He was first elected in the early 1920s and had a distinguished political career, serving in government as First Lord of Admiralty and Minister of Defence. In May 1929, he said:

"There will be many cries raised at the General Election, but the overriding issue will be the cure of poverty and unemployment."

These are still issues for us today and I am proud to be a member of a party that has these goals. However, we should not be content that, over 70 years on from that speech, we are still grappling with the same problems. Nevertheless, that we find ourselves in a position where these are realistic goals is a tribute to the Labour Government of the past four years and to the measures set out in the legislation proposed in the Queen's Speech. There is also recognition that we should not be content with tackling such issues only within our borders, but that the reduction of poverty should be a central aim of United Kingdom international development assistance.

The second Labour Co-operative Member for Parliament—also for Sheffield, Hillsborough—was George Darling, who was first elected in 1966 and served until 1974, when he was made a life peer.

I am sure that, like me, many new Members have received letters congratulating them on their victory; some from old friends or, as in my case, former bosses. One, however, was particularly unexpected. Richard Corbett, Member of the European Parliament for Yorkshire and the Humber, wrote as follows:

"Dear M^{rs} G, I am writing to say how sorry I am that you were not elected. I know how terribly disappointing it must have been for you."

I hope that he does not know something that I do not; disappointment would hardly cover it.

Finally, I wish to comment briefly on the adoption and children Bill. I want to associate myself with the comments of the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis), who urged us to scrutinise the Bill properly as it will affect the lives of many children. Over the past five years, I have had experience of, and significant responsibility for, making decisions on adoptions. The importance of these decisions cannot be underestimated; they demand considerable care and expertise. Adoption cannot be viewed merely as substituting one set of parents for another for a child who needs a new family. Adoption has lifelong implications for all three sides of the adoption triangle—the birth family, the child and the adoptive family.

I welcome proposals to speed up adoption for the many children who are currently awaiting adoptive families. Setting up a national register will help to ensure that children are matched as soon as possible with approved adoptive parents.

I particularly welcome the proposal to place a duty on local authorities to provide adoption support services. Most of the children who are adopted today have been in the care of the local authority. Their experiences will mean that they will demand more care and support than other children. A child who settles happily into a family at the age of three may experience extreme difficulties when a teenager, with which she or her family are ill prepared to cope. The continuing availability of support for those involved in adoption can be crucial if a family is to avoid further breakdown. I make a particular plea that such support is properly funded and that consideration is also given to putting funding for adoption allowances on a firmer footing.

In my work, time and again, I was amazed to see what the love and dedication of families could do for children who had experienced neglect and abuse. Adoption is so often about ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

There are many children waiting for more ordinary people to come forward and care for them. The Bill will, I believe, help to achieve that goal.

I am pleased to support the Queen's Speech.

5.27 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Ms Munn). Her predecessor, Bill Michie, was well known in the House. Everybody got on well with him, and he will be missed. He has been replaced by a lady with a toothy smile, as she told us herself, and we look forward to seeing that toothy smile for many years to come. She has already mentioned an interest of hers, and I know that she will be joined by many right hon. and hon. Members who wish to see some common sense in adoption matters. We wish her well in her campaign on that issue.

This is an important debate on the Queen's Speech, and I wish to use my time to concentrate on the effects of foot and mouth. The disease has hit Ribble Valley very hard. At the outset of the general election, the constituency saw a number of outbreaks and, sadly, they have carried on apace.

We were delighted when the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs came to Gisburn yesterday. The hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) and I were there, along with members of the farming fraternity and the tourism industry. They were able to put their concerns to the Secretary of State at first hand. They made a number of suggestions and although I thought it quite right that the right hon. Lady did not come forward with immediate answers—after all, she is still feeling her way in this new Department—she listened to what they said. They will be waiting to hear what constructive proposals she makes in the weeks immediately ahead—some people cannot wait months for new proposals.

It is sometimes said that foot and mouth affects only a small percentage of livestock. However, where foot and mouth strikes, it affects 100 per cent. of animals. At this time of the year, we are used to seeing sheep, lambs and cows in the fields. Yesterday, I was at the home of a farmer whose animals had been culled in Worston. She told me how devastating it was. People are used to seeing all the animals in the fields, but there are no animals in the fields surrounding certain villages now. It has hit the people very hard.

Today, I sent messages to farmers who had written in. One wrote:

"Everyone should realise that this disease is far from over, and people's lives are being ruined. You only need to look at the faces of our local farmer and his family to understand that a lifetime of work and commitment has been ended at the hand of a slaughterman's gun due to the spread of foot and mouth."

I have other such messages, which speak with passion and experience about the enormous impact of the disease. It is not only farmers but their neighbours and friends who are affected because they feel for the farmers in their plight. They want the disease to be eradicated as quickly as possible.

People also want to know that there is a future for farming. That question was raised yesterday. The hon. Member for Pendle mentioned the rumours that persist that when restocking takes place it will be at a greatly reduced level and that there is a conspiracy to reduce the

number of animals. I was reassured when the Minister said that there was no such policy. We want to know what is to happen in the short and the long term.

I hope that the inquiry will be full and public. We do not want it to continue for an inordinate length of time or to be inordinately costly, but we want a thorough examination that will be useful. I do not know what happened to the 1967 report, but it was not as useful as it should have been—we would not have been facing the present distress if it had been. We have to learn from 1967 and from what is happening now, so we need a public inquiry. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) has made suggestions and has laid them in the Library. I hope that the Minister will be able to consider constructively that suggestion about how the public inquiry should be undertaken.

Many people are questioning how the disease has spread into new areas. One lady asked me yesterday whether we knew if the disease could live on the beaks of birds and, if so, for how long. She suggested that birds get at the carcasses or on to diseased animals and that it is spread in that way. Such questions are being asked and we need to know the answers.

Farmers have referred to the importing of meat that is not of the same quality as our meat. It has been suggested that diseased meat could have caused the outbreak. If that is the case, we need to know and we need to be reassured that positive action will be taken to prevent that from happening again.

Yesterday, farmers were talking about a level playing field. They agree to enforce all the extra hygiene rules and the regulations to ensure that we have the highest standards of meat and yet they face competition from abroad—from inferior meat from countries that do not have the same rules and regulations. That cannot be right or fair.

People want a full debate about the disease. We have not had such a debate in Government time and I hope that we will have at least one full day to discuss it before the recess. That is not too much to ask of the Government. Whenever the Government were intending to rise for the recess, they could add one more day for business. Let us debate the matter then. It would be wholly wrong to rise for the recess without a full debate in Government time so that we can all make positive contributions.

People want honesty about the disease. Farmers are angry because they believe that its importance has been downgraded and kicked to one side. The media were interested before the election, but now that that is over we cannot get their interest back. The issue has been sidelined and people are forgetting about farmers. We need to let farmers and those who have been blighted by foot and mouth know that we have not forgotten them and that we understand the pain that they feel and their situation.

The question of compensation has been raised. In some cases it has been paid late, but it has at least been paid. Farmers outside the dairy sector who have not been able to move their animals for months have suffered too, but they have received no money. I do not know what some of them would have done had they not had help from the agricultural charities. When a similar crisis breaks out again, we must look at what support can be given direct to farmers who, because of foot and mouth, can neither move nor sell their animals.

[Mr. Nigel Evans]

In addition, are farmers who receive compensation expected to live off that money? My fear is that the erosion caused by living expenses over, say, six months will mean that they will not have enough money to restock to the levels obtaining before foot and mouth hit. The Government have not addressed the general problem of restocking but perhaps, when the disease has been eradicated, we can start to look at the future for farming in this country.

I have heard many horror stories from farmers whose animals have been culled. In some cases, the culling has not been performed humanely. I have heard about pot shots being taken at animals in the fields. That happened in Ribbles Valley in the past couple of weeks, and it cannot be right. We were told, after a similar incident in Wales, that such a thing would never happen again. It must not; people involved in the slaughter must be directed to ensure that it is done in the most humane manner possible, and that animal carcasses are removed. However, I still do not understand why animals are not buried on-farm.

We must look to the long-term future, and decide what direct action can be taken to help the tourism industry. My constituency has many tourism industries that have been badly affected by the disease. The Secretary of State said that she wanted to get on top of the problem by the autumn. She has our full support, but action must be taken before the autumn comes—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has had his 10 minutes.

5.37 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw): I prepared for this, my maiden speech, with the most exquisite of cream teas at the village school fair this weekend. After it, I went to one of my house's outbuildings, where I rummaged through some of the junk of yesteryear. I came across a very old and dusty trunk, such as might feature in classic children's books—it is mysterious enough for Harry Potter to look at. With trepidation, I prised it open. I found a few historic gems and two old newspapers. One was a rolled-up edition of the *Daily Mail* from 1934. The paper was a broadsheet in those days, but its contents were familiar, with stories about an opium raid in London, concern over the school syllabus, the jailing of a gang of shoplifters—and about a professor calling for an integrated transport system. How times have changed!

Since 1934, the House has heard only two maiden speeches from hon. Members for Bassetlaw—from Captain Fred Bellenger in 1936, and from Joe Ashton in 1968. Captain Bellenger was reputed to have the most beautiful spouse of any hon. Member in the House at the time; and I am certain that that tradition has been upheld in this Parliament. My wife is a business woman, an occasional lorry driver, and an exporter to Europe, so I can be certain that I will be kept well informed about the concerns of business with regard to the price of diesel.

Captain Bellenger called for an increase in MPs' pay in his maiden speech, and Joe Ashton's autobiography reports that he took up the theme. Reputedly, his first words to Harold Wilson were, "Prime Minister, when do we get paid?" Like Fred, Joe served the constituency well for more than 30 years. The particular affection that local

farmers and members of the Conservative party felt for Joe is testimony to his appeal. I have given a solemn undertaking to my constituents never to mention Sheffield Wednesday other than today in saluting Joe's work—the two being inseparable. My own preference is for the Tigers—Worksop Town—and, on current trends, I will soon be entertaining Joe as the two teams meet in the same league.

Joe's autobiography has a foreword by the former Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook, who was, I am afraid, too busy to accept my invitation to Worksop during the recent election campaign. More's the pity, as I can announce today that the award for the top election breakfast in 2001 goes to May's cafe in Worksop. It provided a veritable feast—enough to sustain any politician through the rigour of the campaign.

One of the things least known about Bassetlaw is where it is. Well, north Nottinghamshire is Robin Hood country, although whether in his coup d'état Lord Hattersley intends to star as Robin Hood or one of the merry men, I am not yet sure. We have a swathe of green across the constituency: it was once the dukeries, where landed gentry rested at leisure.

Let me return to the old trunk, for I mentioned a second newspaper. Pasted to the inside of the trunk is an 1880 edition of the *Retford and Gainsborough Times* headlined "Tories gain in Sheffield"—strange times indeed. I take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Ms Munn) on an excellent maiden speech. I am sure that she will go well in the House. The year 1880—121 years ago—was the last time that Bassetlaw had a Member of Parliament who lived in the constituency, as I do. I live in the strawberry capital of Britain.

In 1880, my village had 40 dwellings, three of them pubs. There were two murders, one of them of a publican by the staff of one of the local pubs, and there was a severe alcohol problem. I have still to uncover any evidence of crowd incursions onto the village cricket pitch. Village life is rather more placid these days.

Swathes of red strawberries fill the fields during summer, and these are no ordinary strawberries. The best strawberries are hand picked and packed and then sent around the country to supermarket distribution centres. If I go to the local supermarket, I may find that my local strawberries have done a round-Britain trip. In reviewing our agricultural policy, I echo local sentiment—what a strange way to run the world.

My village has what every village needs—a school, a pub and a post office. I shall be looking to this Parliament for policies that sustain that basic social infrastructure of rural life. During the pre-election period, I lived on a large beef farm. I take this opportunity to congratulate those in my constituency and elsewhere who acted with speed and certainty to take precautions that have left Bassetlaw and Nottinghamshire foot and mouth free, unlike in 1967. We need a food policy that gives our farmers and rural communities certainty in planning, not merely for a year or two but for 20 years and more.

We also have the brown of many brownfield sites. With 4,500 job losses in the past 12 months—worse than in any constituency in the United Kingdom—we need sustained investment. We certainly have the land, especially at former colliery sites.

My forefathers came from Epworth, six miles across the Yorkshire border. They were saddlers and contemporaries of John Wesley. Bassetlaw is endowed with many fantastic Wesleyan chapels, and untapped tourist potential certainly exists. We are also the home of the pilgrim fathers. When Finningley airport is opened, as it surely must be, there will be tremendous potential for enticing American tourists. In February, large numbers of tourists come to Bassetlaw as part of the countryside turns white at Hodsock priory with the most beautiful white snowdrops one could find anywhere. I recommend it to everyone.

Communities of every type comprise Bassetlaw. The people are hard working and honest; they are grafters. In the war, they were the men who dug the coal, and those who fought for king and country, and the women who made the bombs, many of them stored in secret locations across my constituency. These are not an office-based people by tradition, but they can be, if given the skills.

I hope that I have given the House a bit of the kaleidoscope of the colours of my constituency—the greens, the reds, the browns, the whites. But in the last century, there was one other seasonal colour. Every four or five years, for about three weeks, every hedgerow, farmer's field and roadside verge turned a dark blue. That was until one spring in 1997, when that traditional blue was seen much less. In this new century, I am pleased to inform the House that not only has that unnatural visitor virtually disappeared from Bassetlaw's fields and hedgerows, but the farmers who once planted it with abandon now remove it on sight, should it spread to their land.

I look forward to serving the people of Bassetlaw well in the House.

5.46 pm

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann). He was among the first group of MPs that I met at Westminster, in a television studio, and all the new Members there made it clear that their prime duty would be to their constituents, which I found very welcome. I would argue about the best election breakfast, because I could recommend the Horse Fair cafe in Kidderminster, and I would argue about the strawberries—the strawberries of Wyre Forest are magnificent—but if that is a sample of the speeches that we shall get from the hon. Gentleman, I look forward to more.

I address the House as, I believe, the oldest new boy. I have had the ultimate compliment for the older generation in that the Fees Office, before it would pay me, demanded to see my birth certificate.

I come with an overwhelming mandate from the people with whom I have lived and worked—[*Interruption.*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat when I am on my feet. Someone's mobile phone is going off; we really cannot have that in the House.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I come with an overwhelming mandate from the people with whom I have lived and worked for nearly 30 years,

and they have now given me the greatest honour and privilege—that of representing them here in the House before you.

My predecessor, the former hon. Member for Wyre Forest, was the first Labour Member for the constituency for 40 years, and on election he took the welcome decision to move and to live locally. He was known as a very hard-working constituency MP, who took on many local personal and general problems with great energy and commitment. He achieved rapid promotion, but he took advice from politicians and civil servants and a small minority of local doctors about the hospital, the single local issue that meant most to his constituents. He genuinely believed that he was doing the best for his constituents in that and all matters.

Wyre Forest—rather like Bassetlaw, I do not think that anyone knows where it is—is in north-west Worcestershire, a large rural area with some towns, and suffering badly from foot and mouth disease, particularly in the neighbourhood of Chaddesley Corbett. The large towns are Kidderminster, known for its carpets, for the Kidderminster Harriers and for the Severn Valley railway; Stourport, known for its inland docks, being the Blackpool for the Birmingham residents; and Bewdley, sadly known for its floods, but also for its festival. Hon. Members who represent Birmingham constituencies probably do not realise that, in the middle ages, Birmingham was referred to as Birmingham by Bewdley.

The previous hon. Member for Tatton, whom I count as one of my friends and mentors, described himself as “An Accidental MP”. I am exactly the opposite—an intentional MP but of late onset. “Late onset” to a doctor means late in life.

Recently, it has been my intention to become an MP because of an all-consuming passion, born out of an intense anger about the arrogant, dismissive and unfair treatment that my friends at home have had to suffer at the hands of unelected quangos and civil servants. I and the majority of voters knew that the voice of the people was not being heard, despite successes at local elections, and we decided to use the ultimate weapon of the democratic society—the ballot box. We demand that we be heard and that our views and needs be recognised and acted on.

I must mention the uniquely drastic, punitive and unfair downgrading of Kidderminster general hospital—an acute hospital of 300 beds that earned a charter mark for all its services. How has that been allowed to happen? Consultation was, I am afraid, a farce. The option appraisal was dressed up in pseudo-statistical clothes, but was, in reality, just a vote. The application for judicial review asked a simple question, “Is it lawful to consult on one preferred option only?” The answer, of course, was yes, so the quality of consultation was not revealed, only the quantity.

How has the change been allowed to progress unhindered? This is sinister. Following local doctors' initial documented and unanimous disagreement with the health authority, they have been effectively silenced. Three consultants across the county have bravely spoken in public about disasters and disadvantages, and they have all been censured by managers and politicians. Thus, doctors who opposed the downgrading have been effectively gagged and it was possible to promote the myth that local medical opinion was in favour of the changes.

[Dr. Taylor]

The other myth that was devastating to us was that the downgrading took place because of royal college guidelines. That was not the case. Let us look around the country: the same royal college guidelines have been interpreted entirely differently, so more sensitive downgrading has taken place at Kendal, Bishop Auckland, Neath, Hexham and several other hospitals.

My constituents will not rest until it has been made possible to ensure the provision of emergency services locally. In the meantime, the scandalous waste of money planned for Kidderminster must be stopped. The newest ward block opened in 1995 at a cost of £14 million. It is about to be gutted at a cost of £13.7 million to provide one-stop clinics, which have been in place in existing buildings for 10 years. That local hospital issue is an example of the threat to local hospital services for rural and semi-rural communities throughout the country.

The wider issues on which I was elected are to campaign for fairness and openness in decision making and against the use of spin, and for a greater voice for ordinary people in major decisions that will affect them and to help them cut through red tape. I welcome the promises to improve education and to help the police to fight crime. In particular, I welcome the emphasis laid on foot and mouth disease today, because my constituents are badly affected.

I shall also campaign to protect the original ideals of the NHS. I am extremely worried by the threat of increasing privatisation of the NHS. Given my long experience as a doctor in the NHS, as a patient, a manager and, previously, a health authority member, my dream is to represent the patients' voice, which is so weak at present.

I must recount a moment of our campaign. Outside a middle school, I was besieged by children who all wanted my autograph. I was slightly amazed until I realised that they thought I was standing for election against the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair)—the Prime Minister himself. I am pleased to say that that is not one of my ambitions. My ambition is much easier to achieve. I have already appointed myself my party's shadow health spokesman, against little competition. Above all, I shall prize my independence; I have no master save the people I represent, who returned me to the House with such resounding authority.

5.55 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) on his extremely interesting maiden speech, which held the rapt attention of all Members of the House. His detailed knowledge of the inner workings of the national health service will enable him to make an important contribution to the deliberations of the House in the years ahead, but for only four years, I hope. I was also impressed by the other Members who made their maiden speeches this afternoon—my hon. Friends the Members for Bassetlaw (John Mann) and for Sheffield, Heeley (Ms Munn) and the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Duncan), all of whom will make valuable contributions.

I want to say a word or two about the formation of the new Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I welcome that development, as the abolition of the

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was long overdue, and the Ministry had few friends as foot and mouth disease took its course. The decision will also enable the Government to make the linkages between agriculture, food production and environmental policy that much tighter, which I welcome.

On the other hand, there are dangers, because environmental policy may come to be considered as entirely an issue of the countryside and be defined rather softly as involving protection of green fields, tree planting, making small changes to agriculture and protecting rural villages. It would be unfortunate if we allowed that to happen, because, essentially, environmental policy should deal with the hard and important questions of waste management, the sustainability of our natural resources, the quality of life in urban and suburban areas, the nature of our transport systems and energy supply.

I therefore ask the members of the new Department's ministerial team, who are working in a Department that ties environment and agriculture together more closely, not to forget their responsibilities to ensure that the work of other Departments is scrutinised and influenced in terms of its environmental impact. I call on Ministers to take a particular interest in the work of the Treasury and fiscal policy and the work of the Department of Trade and Industry as well as matters of transport and local government.

I want to make a brief point about foot and mouth, which has dominated the debate. My constituency of Bury, North is largely urban and suburban, but it contains a small agricultural interest. Thankfully, the farmers in my constituency have not suffered directly because of foot and mouth, but many businesses in urban and suburban areas have been affected. Therefore, when the Government consider the consequences of foot and mouth and, in particular, the compensation payable to its victims, will they please pay attention to urban businesses that have suffered because of what has happened in the countryside?

We tend to think entirely in terms of farmers and rural businesses, which is a worrying tendency that I want to check, because I know of businesses in my constituency that have gone through an extremely difficult period over the past six months. They need some attention, too.

I welcome the fact that there will be an inquiry and I understand the Government's desire to hold it urgently and quickly rather than have it drag on for years and years. That is understandable, and we need to learn the lessons of how the disease has been managed and gradually brought under control. However, in focusing on the disease itself and in trying better to equip ourselves to cope with a future outbreak, we are missing the bigger picture. It is difficult to say this when so many farming communities have been stricken by foot and mouth, but the bigger picture is that many aspects of the intensive industrial agricultural practices to which we have become used for half a century are unsustainable. Indeed, some are revolting and need to be challenged and banned.

I hope that the Government will not only conduct an inquiry into the management of foot and mouth to learn lessons for the future, but hold a wider debate on the nature of food production. The consumption of less meat would have enormous advantages for the economy of the countryside. Its impact on human health would improve

the quality of people's lives. Biodiversity would also be enhanced. I want an inquiry to take place about moving away from intensive industrialised agriculture.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Does my hon. Friend agree that we should also consider consumption? What this country lacks is an effective food policy.

Mr. Chaytor: I agree completely. We should also consider how four large supermarkets control the supply of food and most people's diet. There are wider issues than disease management.

On climate change, it is interesting that we have a new Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but that, according to the Order Paper, the debate does not cover the environment. Although the Opposition's amendment makes a passing reference to protecting the environment, the most profound issue that every country faces is the threat posed by climate change. All the excellent policies in the Queen's Speech and the Government's achievements of the past four years will be as nothing if we do not get the policy on climate change right.

I was interested to hear the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) make encouraging remarks about the importance of climate change. He said that his party recognises the problem, but the Conservatives said nothing in their four years of opposition and did nothing in their 18 years of government to acknowledge the threats posed by climate change. That must be seen in the light of the new intransigence of the Bush Administration in the United States and new scientific evidence.

The second report of the intergovernmental panel on climate change, published in January, revised upwards its assessment of global warming. In the past few days, *Nature* published research by Scandinavian scientists on what impact the melting ice floe in Greenland might have on the Gulf stream. It could lower the temperature in the United Kingdom, which would have an impact on agriculture. We must get to grips with that. It is no good simply saying that it is a good point; the Government have to continue to be prepared to take the hard decisions to reduce the consumption of fossil fuels, which the Opposition have resisted.

The Government announced yesterday a serious review of energy policy. That is overdue, but welcome. The country is at a crossroads. My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw was concerned about the price of diesel. We can continue to delude ourselves that we can burn off fossil fuels as if there is no tomorrow and that the supply of coal, gas and diesel is infinite, but we cannot sweep under the carpet the fact that the price of diesel and other fossil fuels needs to increase if we are to reduce consumption. The difficulty is that there is huge public resistance to that—they have not made the connection between burning diesel, petrol and oil for heating and the impact that that has on climate change.

I call on the Government to think more seriously about how they can raise the consciousness and understanding of the public. They need to conduct a major information programme on the link between burning fossil fuels and the impact of climate change. I hope that the Minister will assure us that he will not sit back and rest on the laurels of the achievements of the past four years, and that he intends to make great progress on climate change policy.

6.5 pm

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): In my maiden speech to the House, I should like to pay tribute to my predecessor, Andrew Welsh, who served the people of Angus so well for so many years. Andrew was first elected to the House in 1974 for the constituency of Angus, South. He then served as Member for Angus, East and, since 1987, for Angus. In all those years, he effectively pursued, with single-minded determination, the interests of his constituents and of Scotland. I am delighted that Andrew continues to serve the people of Angus as our first Member of the Scottish Parliament and as convener of its Audit Committee.

Angus is a constituency of small towns and villages with a large rural area comprising the eastern part of Angus, small parts of Dundee and the villages of eastern Perthshire. It also includes my home town of Arbroath, where the first declaration of Scottish independence was signed in 1320 and where we look forward to hosting the signing of the next.

Angus is a beautiful part of our country, but it is not without its problems. In his many years in the House, Andrew Welsh fought for the future of health services in Angus and, to coin a phrase, that work goes on. The hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) told us about the situation in his constituency. That is all too familiar to the people of Angus. One of the greatest problems facing rural areas in Scotland is the centralisation of services. Last week, the Prime Minister and other Labour Members talked about improvements in the health service, but that is not the experience of my area and many other rural areas in Scotland.

The health trust in Tayside has possibly the biggest deficit in the country. It cannot even tell us its exact size. It has embarked on a policy of centralisation of services, with disastrous consequences for my constituency and those of my hon. Friends the Members for North Tayside (Pete Wishart) and for Perth (Annabelle Ewing). Stracathro hospital—the only hospital between Dundee and Aberdeen to offer acute services—is under threat of closure. Services, including acute medicine, are being removed to Dundee. In the past two years, we have suffered cut upon cut. Tayside health board undertook an acute services review to examine the health service in Tayside and make recommendations. Yet before its report was considered, the health board announced the removal of acute medicine from Stracathro.

In the Prime Minister's speech last week, he mentioned staff morale in the health service. On Tayside, it is at rock bottom. They do not know from one week to the next what is to happen to their hospitals or jobs. It has become a vicious circle: staff leave to find security, but new staff cannot be attracted because of the uncertainties of the future. We are told that a new hospital in Angus will replace Stracathro hospital. Perhaps it will form part of the biggest hospital building programme since the war that the Prime Minister mentioned. However, the new hospital will not have anything like the range of services that are provided by Stracathro. Services that are removed to Dundee are unlikely to return to Angus.

We have been told that no cuts have been made to public services, but if services are removed and a hospital provides lesser services, what is that if it is not a cut in services to a community? As we have heard, Angus is not alone in that.

[Mr. Michael Weir]

In the Queen's Speech we are told that patients will be given greater influence over the health service. The people of Angus want an end to the ruinous rundown of services and the crazy centralising agenda that will leave no acute services between Dundee and Aberdeen. Those who have driven up the A90 may have seen the sign for the cafe at the entrance of Stracathro which says:

"Ye May Gang Faur and Fare Waur".

That may well turn out to be the epitaph of hospitals in rural Scotland because many of my constituents will have to gang faur and may fare waur, if they can ever get there in the first place.

There is a difficulty at the heart of the Government's programme for the NHS. They talk about the health service in rural areas and the private finance initiative, but how many private finance companies will invest in small rural hospitals or schools? They will be looking for the big projects in urban areas.

You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will be aware that the provision of health services in Scotland is a devolved matter, but, ultimately, funding is decided by this House. In the course of the debate on the Queen's Speech, former Ministers on both sides of the House have called for a re-examination of the Barnett formula. But hon. Members should be aware that that formula will produce a squeeze on Scottish spending of some £2 billion during the next three years, of which some £400 million will come from health.

How do the Government believe that the Scottish health service can be improved in that situation? The continual squeeze can lead only to more closures and poorer services for patients in Tayside and throughout Scotland. There is, of course, an answer to the question, and that is to give the Scottish Parliament the full fiscal autonomy that would allow us to invest Scotland's wealth in Scotland's health and other services. I am sure that we shall hear a lot more of that argument in this House.

The hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) mentioned the level of petrol tax. The Chancellor's refusal to concede any ground on the level of fuel duty imposed on our motorists causes great hardship in rural areas, particularly in rural Scotland. A one-size-fits-all policy designed to ease traffic congestion in the cities does not work in rural areas where, in many places, there is no realistic alternative to the private motor car. It is impossible for someone to get from the top of Glen Isla to hospital in Dundee by public transport. High fuel prices hit everyone in rural areas, particularly the less well-off. A litre of petrol in the Angus towns is already significantly more expensive than in city areas, and it is even more expensive in the few rural petrol stations that have managed to stay afloat. The people of rural Scotland face the double whammy of centralisation of services and increased travel costs.

The provision of good health and other services is essential to maintain rural communities. The removal of such services will inevitably lead to a lower standard of life and economic decline. If we cannot even provide good health services, how can we attract new employers to our rural areas? We should not concentrate purely on agriculture. Many small towns in our rural communities are suffering greatly from the current economic situation.

The need for new investment was graphically illustrated in my constituency in the past fortnight with GlaxoSmithKline's announcement that it was putting its Montrose factory up for sale following yet another merger. That announcement was made to the stock exchange in London before it was made to the work force or to the people of Montrose. It was a complete shock to the town, causing great distress and anxiety to the work force and townspeople, and it was not helped by some of the sensationalist reporting on the extent of possible job losses.

That factory is by far and away the biggest employer in Montrose and the surrounding area. Any rundown will cause great economic hardship. That example shows how the actions of large companies can decimate communities. There may be grounds for cautious optimism that the situation in Montrose may not be as bad as first feared, but the future hangs in the balance and the workers and their families face anxious times. The Government wish to "introduce legislation to encourage enterprise, strengthen competition laws, and promote safeguards for consumers."

But there is nothing in the Queen's Speech about consulting the workers. The Government have recently signed up to the European directive on consultation, and I hope that the regulations made thereunder will have real teeth.

If the Government's central objective is really

"economic stability . . . leading to a more prosperous and inclusive society"

they must look clearly at the need to encourage industry and industrial development in rural areas such as Angus—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am afraid that I must halt the hon. Gentleman there.

6.15 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn): In rising to make my first speech to the House, I am fully aware of the history that goes before me. Ynys Môn, or as it is known in its English form, Anglesey, is unique in parliamentary terms. Since the second world war, four different parties have represented it in the House.

First, there was the Liberal party with Megan Lloyd George, the daughter of the great Welsh Prime Minister. She served the island from 1929 to 1951. Her powerful presence in the House ensured that Anglesey was in the political mainstream during those difficult times.

In 1951, the Labour party, through Cledwyn Hughes, later Lord Cledwyn of Penrhos, took the seat and served for 28 years. I shall pay tribute to Cledwyn later.

In 1979, Anglesey went blue. The Tory Member, Keith Best, was a popular and hard-working Member, but he fell from grace by—let me put this gently—immersing himself in the popular share capitalism of the day and becoming a little enthusiastic, as a consequence of which his parliamentary career came to an abrupt end.

My immediate predecessor, Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones, took full advantage of Mr. Best's downfall and, in 1987, Ynys Môn returned its first Welsh nationalist Member. In 1999, Mr. Jones was elected to the National Assembly for Wales and took on a dual mandate. He later became leader of Plaid Cymru and stood down at the general election to concentrate his efforts in Cardiff. I wish him well in that task—at least until 2003.

I return to pay tribute to Cledwyn Hughes. He was a true giant of Welsh politics and represented Anglesey in both Houses of Parliament for more than 50 years. Cledwyn was never a quitter. The 1951 election was his third attempt, against the advice of his father, a staunch Liberal and friend of Lloyd George. Cledwyn was one of the few people I have known who could say that Lloyd George knew his father. He was driven into politics by the desire to improve the quality of life for the people of Anglesey.

As Opposition spokesman, Cledwyn put to good use his background in local government and law, and ensured that social legislation to improve people's living conditions was at the top of the agenda. Following the 1964 election, he became a Minister with responsibility for overseas affairs, and in 1966 he became the second Secretary of State for Wales. He was a passionate supporter of devolving matters and, along with Jim Griffiths, was the true architect of Welsh devolution.

Cledwyn was chairman of the parliamentary Labour party during the latter years of the Callaghan Government, and went on to lead the Labour party in the other place. During his tenure as Member of Parliament for Anglesey, the island experienced unprecedented economic growth due to his drive and enthusiasm. In December last year, I had the privilege of being his guest when he was given the freedom of the city of Cardiff for his services to Wales and to the capital city. Alas, that turned out to be his last public engagement, but a fitting tribute was paid to Cledwyn by the lord mayor of Cardiff, who said:

"Cledwyn was an outward looking patriot, as opposed to an inward looking nationalist".

Those words are so true. Cledwyn was at ease at the heart of Welsh, British and foreign politics.

But the best tribute to Cledwyn was paid on 7 June when the people of Anglesey elected a Labour Member of Parliament. It was the first of only two gains for Labour on that night. After winning Ynys Môn, Labour represents the four corners of Wales. Ours is the only party that can assume the title of the party of Wales: "y blaid gwir Cymru—the true party of Wales". Ynys Môn is affectionately known as "Môn Mam Cymru—the mother of Wales". History attributes the name to the extensive cornfields that supplied the Welsh nation during many invasions. The island was a chief centre for the druids, cursed the Romans and later became a stronghold of the princes of Gwynedd. For 200 years, Anglesey was also subject to Norse raids. Anglesey has a rich history, but it does not live in the past. Today, it is a centre of Welsh culture and gives a welcome or "croeso" to people from all over the world. Its scenic beauty is second to none, but hon. Members should not take my word for it—please visit.

It is a great sadness that, over the past two decades, Anglesey has, none the less, risen to the top of the wrong league tables. It has the highest unemployment in Wales and the highest rate of depopulation, with about 500 young people aged between 18 and 36 leaving the constituency to seek work each year. Ynys Môn is a diverse constituency. Predominantly rural, in recent months it has suffered terrible loss owing to the foot and mouth crisis. Both agriculture and tourism, as well as auxiliary businesses, have been hit hard.

However, because of the resilience of the island community, it is already moving forward and looking forward to the challenges of the future. I believe that I

can play a proactive role in that and that measures announced in the Queen's Speech will assist. Fundamental issues were addressed in it: the modernisation of public services is key. While many of the public services are now devolved to the National Assembly for Wales, it is vital that there is genuine co-operation between this House and the Assembly. I regard myself as having equal roles as a facilitator and a legislator. I am comfortable with the new politics that has emerged post-devolution and I welcome the Government's commitment to devolution in Wales and Scotland and to retaining a strong United Kingdom. Economic stability and sound finances are the foundations on which that can be built.

A fully integrated transport system is vital to delivering prosperity throughout the UK, especially to areas on the periphery such as my constituency. I am pleased that in 1997 the Government undertook the dualling of the A55 across Anglesey and made it a priority. That venture is now complete and I believe that it offers great opportunities to the local economy. It is worth mentioning that under the Tories the A55 did not extend beyond Llanfairpwll—I shall spell that out for *Hansard* later. It is also worth pointing out that Plaid Cymru failed to influence the A55 project. It took a Labour Government to achieve that, which is further evidence of Labour delivering for Ynys Môn. There is evidence of improvement in the railways, but we still have an awfully long way to go and I shall work with my colleagues on the north Wales coast to ensure that we achieve our goals. Everyone throughout the United Kingdom needs a modern transport system.

On modernisation, as the Leader of the House said, this House itself needs reform. How many Parliaments offer a personal hanger on which to hang one's sword and gown on day one, but fail to provide newly elected Members like me with an office or a phone until much later? Archaic splendour must be balanced with modern efficiency. I am aware that much hard work has been done, but priority must in future be given to new Members.

In the past four years, the Government have made a good start in many respects, but I am tired of the remarks that Labour has done nothing for rural communities in its first term. In my constituency, more than 2,000 people benefit from the minimum wage, a further 2,000 families from the working families tax credit, pensioner households from the winter fuel payment, and families from increased child benefit and smaller class sizes. I choose to speak in terms of a united community, rather than rural and urban communities. Ynys Môn might be on the periphery in geographical terms, but I intend to make it central in political terms. Few people get the opportunity to represent their native constituency. The people of Ynys Môn ask for nothing more than "chware teg—fair play."

Arriving in Parliament can be a daunting experience for some new Members: some are in awe, others in fear of the place. I am mindful of my late father's words of wisdom and support, without which I would not be standing here today. I believe that he was quoting Robert Louis Stevenson when he told me:

"Keep your fears to yourself but share your courage."

In the coming months, I will work with other Members diligently and with commitment and courage to ensure that social justice is not an empty cliché but fundamental

[Albert Owen]

to the Queen's Speech and the programme set out therein. I intend to provide the people of Ynys Môn—the mother of Wales—with a strong voice in the mother of Parliaments.

6.25 pm

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen). He made an excellent maiden speech in which he spoke eloquently about several of his predecessors from a variety of different parties. He gave us the rich history of a seat that some of us have had the pleasure of visiting on our holidays, and he spoke about the issues facing his constituency in this Parliament. On the strength of his maiden speech, the whole House will look forward to hearing him speak in future about his constituency and the issues that are of concern to his constituents.

One cannot be a maiden twice, and I return to the House of Commons after an absence of four years—described on Friday by my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary as a “sabbatical”. I do so in a spirit of great humility, first, because I am conscious of the fact that I have a second opportunity to represent a community—on this occasion, the royal town of Sutton Coldfield; and, secondly, because the experience of the past week has made it clear to me that this is a very different House of Commons from the one that I left only four years ago. I know how much I have to learn from my colleagues about the art of opposition and I look forward to doing so. I am, of course, sorry that I am not representing my former constituency, Gedling, which I represented for 10 years, but this is an opportunity to thank my successor, who was far more generous than he need have been on the occasion of his maiden speech in 1997.

It is an enormous honour to follow Sir Norman Fowler, who was well known on both sides of the House. He represented the royal town for 27 years, although, like me, he was a retread from Nottinghamshire who made the pilgrimage across to Sutton Coldfield. He stood up for the midlands against decisions made by southern-based decision makers that often favoured the south over the midlands. On that subject, I should like to express my hope that yesterday's visit to Birmingham by the Minister for Sport reflected a genuine desire to see whether the excellent plan for “the people's stadium”, proposed by Birmingham to substitute for the lamentable performance of Wembley, might come to pass. I greatly hope that the Birmingham proposal will be given a fair wind.

Sir Norman dignified politics. It is no exaggeration to say that he was deeply respected and loved in Sutton Coldfield. Throughout the campaign, I met many non-Conservatives who had voted for him because of his hard work for the constituency over many years. He also scored many significant achievements in Parliament. His abolition of the dock labour scheme was highly controversial at the time. The major changes that he made to the pensions industry were not without their problems, but it is largely thanks to his pioneering work that today this country has the largest amount of funded pensions in Europe—indeed, we have more than all the rest of the EU combined. It is sometimes forgotten that Sir Norman was Secretary of State for both Health and Social Security for no less than six years—a remarkable achievement.

Sir Norman returned Conservative finances to the black when he was chairman of our party, and I believe that he is the only chairman in living memory to have received two standing ovations in the course of one speech at the Conservative party conference—no mean achievement, given the alleged average age of the membership of the Conservative party. It will be of great comfort to his many friends in the House to learn that Sir Norman will soon be installed in the other place, where he threatens to play a major role—in addition, of course, to spending more time with his family.

Following a disastrous decision in 1972, the royal town of Sutton Coldfield became part of Birmingham, albeit for local government purposes only. The royal town is a distinct community: we have our own schools, churches, hospitals and magistrates courts, and a myriad of voluntary sector groups that reflect the enthusiasms that characterise Sutton Coldfield. In the 16th century, the town benefited greatly from Bishop Vesey, who appears to have plundered his see at Exeter to the great advantage of his home town. Sutton Coldfield received a royal charter in 1528. Its endowed municipal charities have grown since then and do much good work. They are jealously guarded from the predatory paws of Birmingham.

Sutton park is the largest municipal park in Europe. It covers 2,400 acres; 70 acres is covered by water. It is a national nature reserve and has recently received a lottery heritage grant for work on heathlands, and a woodland grant. It is a wonderful amenity for local people. It is no exaggeration to say that, while dining at the Boathouse beside the water, one might imagine that one were in the Canadian rockies, rather than five miles from the centre of Britain's second city.

Sutton Coldfield is an area of high affluence, low unemployment and generally high-quality housing, but it is not without its challenges. It groans under the weight of development. Infill, backfill, planning conundrums and the erosion of the green belt are ever present threats throughout Sutton Coldfield. We are very concerned at how the Pedimore development, which was much spoken about in the House by my predecessor, has been given the go-ahead. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) said, local communities should have far more say in planning decisions. That is at the top of our concerns in Sutton Coldfield.

We have many excellent local schools, particularly secondary schools, including two grammar schools, which are over-subscribed and very popular, but we need another secondary school. I know that hon. Members on both sides of the House will agree that some of the saddest letters that Members of Parliament receive are from parents who spell out that they cannot get their children into the school of their choice. We are enormously enthused by a Church of England initiative, which may lead to the building of an additional Church secondary school in Sutton Coldfield. Today, I have written to the Bishop of Birmingham to ask that we be given serious consideration.

The bed-blocking problem in Birmingham affects Sutton Coldfield. I hope that it is now belatedly being addressed, but it is an important problem that must be solved.

We are very concerned about crime. I do not suggest that Sutton Coldfield is in the grip of an epidemic, but over recent years budgets have been constrained, there has

been a tremendous increase in bureaucracy, a decline in police morale and a lamentable drop in the number of special constables. I hope that all those matters can be addressed with great care.

It is against that background that I judge the Queen's Speech. There is no doubt that there is much in it that will be welcomed. I hope that the Government will be able to deliver for my constituents in Sutton Coldfield. I have listened with great care to what the Government have said about health. I have an indirect interest in the health industry because my wife is a doctor in general practice. I am acutely conscious that my constituents, if they are unfortunate enough to be afflicted by cancer, stroke or cardiac disease, are materially less well off than their opposite numbers in many European countries, including Germany and France. That materially worse experience—the great anxiety for both them and their families—cannot be blamed on the last Conservative Government; it cannot be argued that the blame rests with them. The Government have promised world-class public services. They know the tunes, but they must deliver. My job as Member of Parliament for Sutton Coldfield will be to try to ensure that they do.

It is not just about money. The belief is growing that the post-war consensus on the national health service does not deliver. We must look elsewhere—to other countries. The Government must maintain access and availability, but, increasingly, it is up to others to run and to manage health care. I hope that the Government will consider carefully how to make this country's health care the envy of other European countries, instead of continuing to decline and deteriorate. I look forward to the time when we have workplace schemes and stakeholder health plans perhaps, and health care is more available through the proper ordering of the involvement of the private sector. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make a retread maiden speech.

6.35 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am uncertain whether the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell) was delivering a maiden speech, but, in any event, he is certainly worthy of congratulation. His speech bore the hallmarks of a maiden speech in that it lacked extreme partisan rancour and had historic and geographic erudition, which illuminates all our minds when we consider such matters. Indeed, it might be said that, if every speech were a maiden speech, the quality of what we hear would sometimes be raised. Fortunately, I am not in a position to make a maiden speech, although there were moments during my election count when I thought that I was coming jolly close to being born again.

I would like to comment on the Queen's Speech, particularly with regard to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I think that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food made a number of mistakes over a number of years. One of my distinguished predecessors, Sir Valentine Crittall, the first Labour Member for Braintree, was also the first Labour Under-Secretary of State for Agriculture. His picture looks down upon me from my office wall every day. In that sense, the Ministry had a good part to play.

Agriculture is not the only part of our rural communities, but it would be unwise to downgrade it too far. All our rural communities ultimately depend on the

widespread part played by agriculture. It is wrong to say that the Government have done nothing for agriculture. The amount of subsidy that is, rightly, paid to agriculture is enormous. It is the most supported industry of all. Indeed, I believe that more public support is given to agriculture than to all the other industries put together. That is not to say that it is wrong, but it should be recognised that that is the case.

Some people say that we should reform the common agricultural policy and move away from subsidy and support. My view is that we should perhaps change the approach to subsidy and support. It is unrealistic to believe that British agriculture in all its forms can survive in a completely free market. We have heard about palm trees in the west of Scotland. Certain parts of our nation may have climates that are more amenable to agriculture than others, but there are parts of the world with which we can never compete in terms of climate, land and soil. Notwithstanding that fact, our economy needs a strong agricultural base. Therefore, I support the continuation of support and subsidy for British agriculture.

Agriculture is not the only aspect of the rural community. Over the past four to five years, we have made progress in several areas. I do not subscribe to the view, which is normally expressed during election campaigns, that there is town and country and never the twain shall meet. The towns rest upon the countryside, and people interchange between town and countryside. To set one against the other can do no good.

There are particular difficulties in rural communities, one of which is transport. We all subscribe to co-ordinated transport—to better transport. Some villages and hamlets will never have a half-hourly bus service, but we need to find out how to build a valuable and useful transport system in our rural communities.

I am somewhat concerned about the operation of private bus companies. Enormous Government and county support goes into rural bus routes. Every time a private operator makes a loss on a bus route, he closes it and expects the county to pick up the bill. That is the opposite of the principle of cross-subsidisation. If a company operates a private bus service, it should take the good with the bad: it should run profitable services and pay for the unprofitable services out of some of that profit. We should not expect the public purse to take all the unprofitable routes and the private operator to take the profitable ones. Clearly, bus services in rural areas need greater regulation and co-ordination.

Another matter that would make a colossal difference to the lives of people in country areas is an increase in home-to-school transport. If we are serious about reducing the number of motor cars on our roads, the time and place to do it is in transporting children from home to school and back again. Anyone who drives at any time during a school holiday suddenly realises how empty the roads are at half past eight in the morning, compared with the amount of traffic before the holidays. If greater public finance went into providing home-to-school transport, the benefit would be felt not only by children, but by their parents, who are often encumbered in ferrying children around—sometimes to three separate schools. Indeed, we would be providing a service that has been lacking hitherto. The Government have done well in the support that they have given to home-to-school transport, but I urge them to go further so that we can greatly enhance village communities.

[Mr. Alan Hurst]

The crucial social element in the countryside is the post office. We have all lamented the decline in the number of post offices, which has happened over many years; this is not a party issue. The Government have promised that new banking measures will be introduced into the post office system. That is welcome. The Government answered a parliamentary question that I tabled saying that benefits and pensions will still be paid in cash after 2003. That must be encouraged if we are to keep the flow of business through local post offices.

If the post office, the public house, the church and the chapel disappear from the local community, it becomes little more than a dormitory housing estate. We must ensure that those facilities remain. We must do all within our power to increase local employment and work based on agriculture and its subsidiaries, where possible. However, we must also encourage other appropriate businesses in the countryside, so that it becomes a living countryside, as opposed to a picture-postcard ideal that people visit at weekends and for holidays.

6.42 pm

Lady Hermon (North Down): I rise to speak in the House for the very first time in the knowledge that my constituency was last represented by a woman in 1955, the year I was born—no maths please. I am a lady, and I should not like anyone to do the calculation. In fact I am the first woman to be returned to the House from Northern Ireland in almost 30 years. The previous one was Bernadette Devlin, who represented Mid-Ulster as a Unity Member of Parliament in 1969—by the way, I promise not to assault the Home Secretary—and then as an independent from 1970 to 1974. I grew up on a farm only a few miles from her home in Cookstown, but our paths never crossed. She was a Catholic and I a Protestant, and we went to separate schools. When she was 10 and I was two, a new Royal Ulster Constabulary sergeant was appointed to Coalisland, a small village lying between our respective homes.

The previous sergeant had been blown up by a booby-trap bomb placed by the IRA during its 1950s terrorist campaign. The new sergeant tolerated no nonsense. He was a strict disciplinarian and gained a reputation for being somewhat fierce—so much so that, as a child, I remember that the threat of seeing the sergeant was the ultimate deterrent to bad behaviour in our house. The fierce sergeant was none other than Jack Hermon.

Some 30 years later, Jack Hermon was Chief Constable of the RUC, and I was an academic lecturing in the law faculty at Queen's university. One of my colleagues at that time was a shy, bookish, softly-spoken, red-haired, bespectacled young lecturer. How the years have improved my colleague my right hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), the leader of the Ulster Unionist party! I am delighted that he was comprehensively and very wisely returned as our leader by the Ulster Unionist Council at the weekend.

In 1987, having been outraged by the Chief Constable's discrimination against women in the RUC, I wrote an article criticising him bitterly for his actions, of which I sent him a copy. Months of silence followed, then a phone call. It was a man's voice—the voice of someone claiming

to be the Chief Constable, Sir Jack Hermon. All the women here will know what I mean by the phrase, "women's intuition": we know instantly when something is a hoax. I knew instantly that it was a hoax call, so I responded, "If you're the Chief Constable, I'm Brigitte Bardot." So much for female intuition and instincts. To my enormous embarrassment, he was who he said he was, and I was certainly not Brigitte Bardot. So it was that we met, subsequently married and made our home in North Down.

I have, therefore, only been called Lady Hermon for the past 12 years. For the previous 33 years, I had been Sylvia Paisley—although I am not related to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), and nor do I share his political views. I was, nevertheless, delighted when he said that the best decision that the Chief Constable of the RUC ever made was to marry a namesake of his.

When I first stood for selection as a candidate in North Down, I immediately learned how I was perceived by the media. *The Irish News*—the excellent main nationalist paper and one of my favourites—ran a story about the four candidates. The name of each appeared with a little descriptive note. Alongside mine was what was to become a traditional little note: "Lady Hermon, wife of the former Chief Constable of the RUC", and so on. A similar note appeared for each candidate, although they were not described as being married to the Chief Constable. The paper's problem was which photograph to include. Did it put in my photograph or that of any other candidate? No, it put in the photograph of Jack Hermon.

Victory at a general election brings many rewards, including, in my case, a photo of me—not Jack—with one of our Airedale dogs. That picture appeared on the front page of *The Sunday Times*. If I had received a pound coin every time someone had said to me, "What a beautiful dog you have," I would be enormously rich by now. Let me give a bit of advice to all hon. Members: they should never have their photograph taken with a handsome dog.

Amid all the other results in Northern Ireland, where voters appear—I emphasise the word "appear"—to have polarised to Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist party, I urge the House to note the message of co-operation and moderation from North Down. I was selected only on 9 May, the day that the general election was called. In less than a month, Catholics and Protestants, the small Jewish community in Northern Ireland and the Chinese community, Unionist voters, Alliance voters, Social Democratic and Labour party voters, Progressive Unionist party voters and the Women's Coalition all felt comfortable in voting for and returning me to the House with a majority of more than 7,000.

I am, therefore, enormously proud of the people of North Down. They have returned North Down to the Ulster Unionist party; they have returned a woman to Westminster; and, in me, they have returned someone who remains strongly pro-agreement. The people of Northern Ireland need and deserve to see all the agreement implemented; it must not be allowed to stumble and fall at this stage.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, who no one will deny was a colourful character. Robert McCartney QC held the seat from 1995, during which time he made a lasting impression on political life in Northern Ireland. As well

as being a colourful character, he was a powerful orator and he remained something of an enigma to the end. Despite having declared that

"there was more than a whiff of Lady Macbeth about Lady Hermon",

he did not hesitate to step in front of me—leaving his back exposed—to address the press corps before I could make my acceptance speech when the count was declared on 8 June. What a real character. I sincerely wish him well in what was for him an unexpected retirement from the House.

North Down is truly a beautiful coastal constituency. For those who cannot visualise it, it runs along the top of the Ards peninsula. My home town of Donaghadee is well known for its splendid lighthouse, which was built in 1836 and is still in perfect condition, as are all the 100-plus steps that I invite all right hon. and hon. Members to climb and descend regularly as a form of exercise. The maypole, which dominates the centre of Holywood, is also in perfect condition and attracts tourists every year.

Mercifully, the rural hinterland has escaped the ravages of foot and mouth disease. I have listened with great attention and great concern to those who have a dreadful blight on their constituencies as a result of foot and mouth. We in Northern Ireland have escaped the worst of the ravages. That is in no small measure due to the skilful handling of the crisis in Northern Ireland by our own Minister with responsibility for agriculture, Brid Rodgers, to whom I am delighted to pay a warm tribute on behalf of the farmers in my constituency. My father, who is still farming at the age of 85, said that had she been standing in his constituency, he would have voted for her, and he is a long-standing Unionist. She has handled the outbreak superbly well.

During the election campaign I was struck, and rather offended, by the fact that North Down was frequently described in the media as the gold coast, with the "have yachts and have nots"—and more recently as "the gin and jag" constituency. These descriptions paint a grossly inaccurate image of my constituency and its wonderful people. I shall take a few moments to paint a different picture.

It is true that in Bangor we have a magnificent marina that is full of yachts. It is the fourth largest marina in the United Kingdom. It is true also that in Bangor we have the Kilcooley estate, where there are about 650 children without one play park or playground between them. Millisle is a small coastal village which is scenic for tourists, but having canvassed there I can tell a different story. It was there that I was asked for my autograph for the first time. It was a humbling experience to find that young children regarded it as the highlight of their day, week, month and perhaps their year to ask a parliamentary candidate for her autograph.

The lives of all these children deserve to be enriched with much more investment in youth facilities the length and breadth of the constituency.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has used up her time. There will be other occasions.

6.52 pm

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough): It is a delight to follow the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), a newly Member. I congratulate her sincerely on winning

her seat, on winning it as a woman and on being born in 1955. I was born in 1954, so well done. The hon. Lady spoke forcefully and passionately about her constituency, and I am sure that she will be an ornament to her party and to the House. I am sure also that she will not be represented any more by pictures of attractive dogs or husbands, but by her own picture, as she deserves.

I welcome the creation of the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. It will enable the Government to reform the food chain, to promote a more diverse system of agriculture and to regenerate the rural economy. These are issues that concern us all, whether we live in town, as I do, or in country. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Rural Affairs said in the *Western Mail* of 18 June,

"Rural areas are not on a different planet."

The creation of DEFRA clearly implies that agriculture will no longer be producer dominated. The over-dominance of producers encouraged an unhealthy rift between farmers and consumers. Ultimately, it did not even best serve the interests of the industry. Now the Government will be able to look after the food chain in a more integrated way and ensure for once that the interests of farmers and consumers go hand in hand. That means also, and most important, that agriculture practices can become more sustainable, and can protect, rather than detract from, the natural environment and our wildlife.

In all these matters, as many Members have said this afternoon, it is vital that we engage with public opinion. Most people are not concerned only with the cost and quality of their food. They can appreciate the wider environmental issues. There needs to be a wider debate, and perhaps the sort of debate that we have had today. I appreciated the comments of the hon. Member for Ribbles Valley (Mr. Evans), who spoke so movingly about foot and mouth disease.

There is a case for interests to come together to collaborate on getting things right rather than wrong. Producers and the National Farmers Union, for example, should be involved. Supermarkets, consumer groups and tourism interests are clearly vital, as are groups such as the Countryside Alliance, which is not only a hunting lobby. The Campaign for the Protection of Rural England and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds should also be involved.

The average net farming income is about £5,200 per farm in England. That is not sustainable. The common agricultural policy and a producer-dominated Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food did not deliver, and I am glad that MAFF has gone. There is no simple answer, but part of the solution must involve a progressive shift in subsidy payments from commodity and volume production support towards rural development, farm diversification and investment.

The then Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, East and Wallsend (Mr. Brown), secured some progress on the so-called modulation of the CAP a couple of years ago. That is good, but we must go much further. Integrated farm management, as promoted by Linking the Environment and Farming, whose activities I have been delighted to promote in the House, and organic farming require support while they become more established in the marketplace.

Sometimes farmers are thwarted in their attempts to diversify by unhelpful planning regulations. I heard of a farm-based zoo that was refused permission to expand on

[Mrs. Helen Brinton]

the ground of the increased traffic that that would generate. However, it was given permission to fill a field with executive homes, which was not what farmers wanted.

A major underlying problem in rural areas—we have heard about this from hon. Members on both sides of the House—is a lack of public transport, which leads to a dependence on cars for those who have them and to isolation or restricted social work and education opportunities for those who do not. The previous Government announced substantial funding to promote rural bus services, and we look for real and solid improvements on the railways, taking account of a full debate in the House. There is no quick fix.

Car numbers are likely to increase, with all the environmental problems that will ensue. At the least, we must ensure that that does not contribute to global warming through increased emissions. The House knows that I have long advocated—partly through my work on the Select Committee on Environmental Audit—incentives for environmentally friendly road fuel gases. The Chairman of the Committee made a distinguished contribution to the debate earlier.

The Government have responded to the need, not least in the most recent Budget, in which road fuel duty was cut by 40 per cent. In response, the liquefied petroleum gas industry is investing significantly in pumps, but so far mainly in urban areas. The various benefits of road fuel gas availability should be delivered to rural areas. The Scots have an initiative to encourage the installation of LPG pumps and tanks in rural areas in the form of the Scottish rural petrol stations grant scheme. The scheme should be extended to cover rural areas in England and Wales. Taiwan and Japan also subsidise the installation of LPG filling points for environmental reasons.

In the United Kingdom we have used the tax system to incentivise a shift to environmental goods from environmental bads. Let us use the system creatively in the same way to help the countryside. Transport is now part of another Department and I hope that that will not mean that we lose sight of environmental considerations. We must remember the pledge of the previous Government to make such considerations central to policy making. I am concerned that the decisions on some of the proposed new road schemes, such as the Hastings by-pass, will not take a sufficiently long-term, integrated view.

Departments that are too big can, of course, be unwieldy—I shall mention no names, of course—and changing situations require changing departmental boundaries. However, other means can and should be used to ensure that policy making continues to be joined up and take into account all the strands of truly proper development. As colleagues in all parties will agree, that involves having concern not only for producers and profit but—if I may, as a former English teacher, be excused a continuing alliteration—for people and planet, too.

7 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk): Like all the other new Members who have already spoken, I feel very honoured to have been elected as a Member of Parliament. I feel a deep sense of responsibility and gratitude to those who have shown trust in me. I also feel an additional honour,

in that I am something of a rare breed: a Liberal Democrat MP for Norfolk. We have to go back to 1929 to find a previous Liberal MP in Norfolk, and back to 1918 to find the most recent one in North Norfolk. They held their seats for the first 18 years of that century, and I hope that we shall do likewise in this one, although I do not want to pursue the analogy with the previous century any further so far as Liberal fortunes are concerned.

I know that it is customary to pay tribute to one's predecessor, but I wanted to do that in any event. David Prior was the Conservative Member for North Norfolk for four years. Despite that relatively short period, he built up a reputation for assiduous hard work on behalf of his constituents. He was on the liberal wing of the Conservative party. I think that, in modern Conservative parlance, he was a mod as opposed to a rocker. He was brave enough to initiate a debate in the previous Parliament on the reform of our drug laws, which was impressive for a new Member. I am therefore very happy to pay tribute to his contribution in this place.

One of the great privileges of this job is to work with so many unsung heroes beaver away in their own local communities, often without much credit being given to the work that they do. I am thinking in particular of some of the wonderful wardens of sheltered housing schemes whom I have met, and of the people who keep voluntary community projects such as nurseries going in the North Norfolk area. I am also thinking of the carers who look after loved ones in their own homes, and of the many teachers working with a real passion for the benefit of the children in their schools.

I want to pay particular tribute to the achievement of Hickling first school, Colby primary school and Fakenham high school, all of which achieved the honour of beacon status last week, and Cromer high school—also in my constituency—which achieved language college status last week. Those are great achievements for those schools.

North Norfolk is a wonderful constituency to represent. I shall resist the temptation to give the House a tourist's guide to our wonderful coastline, but I shall just mention three villages: the village of Little Snoring, which is, inevitably, larger than the neighbouring village of Great Snoring, and the village of Sloley. One might get a false impression of the pace of life in North Norfolk from the names of those villages.

I want to say a few words about the decline in rural services—in particular the network of rural sub-post offices. A real threat hangs over those businesses in rural areas, and it is not only a future threat. The threat of the loss of benefit payments through sub-post offices means that the value of those businesses is declining dramatically now. Any sub-postmaster or mistress who wants to retire or move on is finding it very difficult, if not impossible, to sell their business. This crisis must be addressed, and it must be a priority for the Government.

The rural transport network, and especially bus services, have been decimated in constituencies such as North Norfolk. Some interesting initiatives now exist, such as the dial-a-ride scheme, which I thoroughly endorse. However, we need more investment in the rural networks and more integration between the services provided by rival companies and between bus and rail services.

It is environmentally nonsensical that, over the years, school transport should have declined dramatically, resulting in endless extra car journeys. It seems so much more sensible to allow children to travel to school by bus, particularly in a dispersed rural area such as North Norfolk. It is also wrong that students over the compulsory school leaving age have to pay for their transport to school, as that is a positive disincentive to children from poor families to carry on their education.

I also want to mention the state of our health service. Constituents have come to see me who are having to wait a year for an appointment with a specialist about their hip, which might be causing them real pain throughout that whole period. That is unacceptable. It takes them a year to get on to the waiting list for the operation. People talk about concerns over creating a two-tier health service, but it is here already. Anyone with money can opt out of the health service here and now. Those on low incomes, particularly pensioners, are left having to wait an unacceptably long time for treatment.

Finally, I want to mention the growing concern about the disengagement of young people from the political process. We have heard a lot about turnouts over the past few weeks, but the concern over young people's voting patterns is the greatest of all. We have a duty to make politics much more relevant and to behave in a way that will rebuild people's trust in the political process. It is incumbent on us to modernise the way in which we carry out our business, and to open this place up to young people. I admit to being excited at being here, and I hope that I can do my best to repay the trust that has been placed in me.

7.8 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). He gave a kind, generous speech in tribute to his predecessor and will clearly bring a gentle and reasoned voice to our debates. I spent many childhood holidays at Cromer zoo in his constituency and I wish him well in this House. *[Laughter.]* I was not one of the exhibits, I hasten to add.

It is a costly business to be returned as a Member of Parliament. Four weeks ago, I had three suits that fitted snugly and a new pair of shoes. In the past four weeks, I have lost more than a stone in weight, my suits all need altering and my visits to the houses of 15,000 of my constituents have worn through enough shoe leather to keep all the cobblers in Brent, North extremely happy for the next four years.

So I stand before the House today a man much diminished, but a politician with a hugely increased majority. I thank my constituents for the trust that they have placed in me, and I thank my wonderful colleagues and friends in my constituency party. Their amazing support, dedication and sheer hard work, not just over four weeks but over four years, have turned a 10,000 Conservative majority into a 10,000 Labour majority in that short space of time. There is no such thing as a safe seat. There are only seats that are worked, and seats that are not. In Brent, North, we certainly intend to go on working ours.

I loved every minute of the campaign and, if she is listening, that includes the harangue that I received from one mother outside Byron Court school. As I said to my

campaign colleagues that afternoon, "I don't think that we were going to get her vote in the first place." What I love is that a campaign takes one as close as one can get to what people are really feeling and what they want done by us in government. Therefore, in rising to support the Queen's Speech, I bring to the debate not the think-tank theory of a policy unit but the raw concerns of my constituents from the doorsteps of Brent, North.

I welcome the commitment in the Queen's Speech to strengthen the police's ability to fight crime. In Brent, we have a good story in that 31 new police recruits have been allocated to the area this year, bringing the force up to full strength for the first time in many years. We have been particularly successful in targeting burglary, which decreased by 16 per cent. last year as a result of a Government-funded Crimestoppers II initiative. However, violent crime in Brent has increased and we need the powers to bring it under control. Much of it is fuelled by drugs and turf wars between dealers and different gangs.

I welcome the proposal to establish a criminal assets recovery agency to get at the proceeds of crime. Drugs are a business, and if one deprives that business of its profits, it will cease trading, just like any other business. Tackling drug crime will not only reduce the instance of violent crime, it will impact on street crime and domestic burglary as well. We know that so much of that crime is committed to obtain money for drugs. Drugs are the cancerous heart of the world of crime and we must ensure that we give the police all the resources that they need to defeat the drugs barons.

I should also like the Government to consider legislating to double the maximum penalty for anyone dealing in drugs to children within half a mile of a school, as they have done in some cities in America. We must legislate to protect our children and deprive the dealer of the concentrated customer base that schools currently provide.

Later, I shall be pressing the Government further about the need to include qat on the list of proscribed substances. Today, I shall simply say that it is all too clear to my constituents, particularly in Sudbury, that that drug is a serious social evil. It has been the cause of a serious arson attack as part of a turf war, and a crowd of young men chewing the drug in one particular area have intimidated and threatened ordinary passers-by, demanding money with menaces.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I must remind him that we are now debating the amendment to the Loyal Address and not the Queen's Speech in general. Although the amendment is termed fairly widely, he really must concentrate his remarks on those terms.

Mr. Gardiner: I am focusing my remarks on that part of the amendment that focuses on world-class public services, and I believe that the public service that police provide is absolutely central to the needs of my constituents.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I judged that the hon. Gentleman was hanging on by a thread and have tried to strengthen his position.

Mr. Gardiner: I take the admonishment in good part and shall try to observe your strictures.

[Mr. Gardiner]

I have placed the fight against crime and drugs as the first message from the doorstep because it is fundamentally a democratic right that our citizens should be free to live their lives without fear. The commitments of the Gracious Speech on police matters and combating crime are therefore particularly welcome to me.

Another feature that will certainly be welcome in Brent, North is the commitment to reform our health system. We have benefited greatly from the Government's capital investment in our local hospital, Northwick Park, which is one of the 182 accident and emergency departments that has been entirely refurbished. With capacity doubled to 90,000 admissions annually and a separate children's A and E to separate children from the Friday night drunks in the main casualty, the facility is faultless.

The best facility in the world, however, is no use unless it has the staffing and back-up to make it function properly. My constituents still wait far too long in casualty because of a lack of nurses and doctors and because the medical beds are four floors above in the petty empire of a different consultant. That is the type of obstacle to efficient health care that our Government must, and I trust will, sweep aside. Managers are often derided in the NHS, but the blame equally often lies in the stupid empire building of consultants who run their own departments to their own satisfaction, not to say their own convenience, and refuse to consider the needs of the hospital as a whole and to put the needs of the patient first.

I am confident that we shall increase the number of nurses and doctors, as we have said in the Labour manifesto. I also trust that we shall be equally robust in reforming the structure of our NHS hospitals to break through the artificial logjams to in-patient care. My constituents have been pleased to see us deliver world-class buildings, but they will not be satisfied by anything less than a first-class service.

I listened with interest to the mostly excellent maiden speech of the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell), who will clearly be an effective contributor to the House. Naturally I could not agree with him about his desire to see the national stadium relocated closer to his constituency, and I shall gently remind him on every future occasion that in his maiden speech he bemoaned the over-development in his constituency. I shall continue to assure him that the national stadium would definitely be an over-development too far for his constituents.

The national stadium is at Wembley, and the national stadium must stay at Wembley. It is vital not only to the economic regeneration of all of north-west London, but to football itself. It is of course possible to build a stadium for less than £440 million—Cardiff, Paris and Sydney are all examples of excellent stadiums built for less. Sadly, however, they all make a loss, not a profit. The new national stadium at Wembley needs to generate revenue that the FA can feed into the grassroots of the game. To do so it needs to incorporate elements that will create that revenue.

I welcome the recent news that Multiplex and ING are prepared in different ways to back the Wembley project to ensure that it is financially viable. I urge the Government and our new team at the Department for

Culture, Media and Sport to do all that they can to back Wembley as the home of football and of our new national stadium.

Integral to that project is the transformation of the London underground and the transport infrastructure off the north circular. The public-private partnership proposals must not only deliver the promised £13 billion of investment, but the integrated system, with unified central control maintained in the public sector, that the Government have promised. I am confident that our Government can deliver that. I believe that it is vital not simply for the future of projects such as Wembley but for the future economic viability of many areas in the penumbra around London that we should do so.

The transport infrastructure has been the subject of much of this debate and is of course integral to the success of cities such as London. London has problems with its rail transport infrastructure, but although people have talked about the need to rationalise, I do not believe that that is the answer. Instead, we must resolve the problems caused by the separation of track companies from rolling stock companies. Such problems have regularly been highlighted in the House, particularly by the Public Accounts Committee. That system was produced in the wrong way by the previous Government.

A system must be introduced in which Railtrack and the operating companies are brought together in defined regional networks so that they can operate in an integrated manner, ending the divide that we have seen to date. Perhaps we should also make the inter-city network an entirely distinct structure. I believe that we must rejoin the track and rolling stock companies, and I hope that the Government will consider new models and new ways of delivering that to the public.

7.18 pm

Mr. Charles Hendry (Wealden): It is a great honour and privilege to speak for the first time in the House as the Member for Wealden and especially as the successor to one of the most loved and respected Members of this place. Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith was in many ways a unique man. He had been a distinguished Minister with responsibility for pensions and for defence, and he had been a distinguished Select Committee Chairman. For many years, he had also been devoted to the North Atlantic Assembly in which he served for 20 years, including as one of its committee chairmen and, for the past five years, as its treasurer.

Sir Geoffrey was a fine debater, devoted to Parliament and its ways. However, what people will remember most about him was that he was an extraordinarily gentle and decent man. I have never heard him say anything unpleasant about anybody in any party. That is a remarkable achievement in the world of politics. He will carry with him the best wishes of this House as he moves into his retirement.

Sir Geoffrey was the most marvellous support to me in the year that I shadowed him as a prospective parliamentary candidate. We worked closely together over that time. He was an immensely diligent Member of Parliament, much loved within the constituency. He campaigned assiduously for local schools and hospitals, for the restoration of the rail link between Uckfield and Lewes, and for farming and rural communities. Those are all issues on which I would wish to continue his work.

I imagine that for many hon. Members the most immediate difference between Sir Geoffrey and I would be sartorial. He could still wear the suits he wore 50 years ago, and regularly did. When he campaigned—even when he was canvassing at the last election—he did so at a trot, managing to jog around the constituency at a rate that I found quite bewildering. When we stood beside each other—him at 77 and me at 42—people asked him why he was giving way for an older man. He still retained those wonderful good looks which people also remembered from his appearances many years ago on television.

Many of my friends, who were waiting up for the election results were concerned that Wealden was about the last constituency in England to declare. They were concerned that there might be a recount, and the following morning and the following week the local newspapers had headlines suggesting that the Wealden result was in jeopardy and that Labour was celebrating a swing. These referred to the fact that the count had taken so long, and it was with some trepidation that I reached for an excellent paper produced by the Library, which reassured me that Wealden had produced the third-largest Conservative majority in the country. Having spent most of my political life fighting in marginal constituencies, I can live with that degree of trepidation and jeopardy.

Many things about Wealden are remarkable. It is a constituency that is only 40-odd miles from London, yet it contains some of the most unspoiled country and beautiful scenery that one could find. Although many people commute out of Wealden to Brighton, Gatwick and London, the constituency is characterised by areas such as Ashdown forest and the historical farms of the High Weald, and areas that are famous for characters such as Winnie the Pooh and Sherlock Holmes, great literary characters who have come to mean a great deal to the constituency.

Wealden also has villages and towns which, in their own way, are extraordinarily special; towns such as Crowborough, Hailsham, Uckfield and Heathfield and a whole host of small villages that make it one of the most desirable places to live. While one should take great comfort from those factors, one should not begin to think that Wealden is not without its problems and genuine anxieties. It is an area that has had much good fortune, but there are still real concerns, the first of which is housing.

The Government's plans—backed locally by the Liberal Democrats—to build tens of thousands of new houses in the greenbelt area are matters of profound concern. It is something that the overwhelming majority of people who live in Wealden would wish to resist. The problem is that we simply do not have the infrastructure locally to cope with those numbers of houses. We do not have the places in our schools or on the local doctors' waiting lists; nor do we have the facilities in our transport network.

I believe it is paramount that decisions on new houses should be made locally by councillors who understand those situations, rather than remotely by Ministers. I do not believe that the previous Secretary of State ever tried to drive either of his two Jags down the narrow lanes of East Sussex, yet the decision was to be his about how many houses we should take. It is vital to an area such as Wealden that those decisions should be made locally.

The next issue of concern is policing. Rural policing has been in great decline and we view that with great anxiety. We have seen the numbers of police in the county fall over recent years, and the number of police on the beat has also fallen. I want those numbers to be restored, more police to be back on the beat and, crucially, our local police stations to be kept open all the time. When someone is apprehended in the night in Crowborough, it does not make sense that they should be transported by two officers to Crawley, because that takes those officers out of service in the community for three or four hours. I will campaign on behalf of my constituents to make sure that we keep those local stations open at weekends and overnight.

There will be a wide welcome for the plans introduced by the now Conservative-controlled county council to reintroduce local community policemen, funded by the county council, so that there can be people in rural communities who work only in the areas where they live and who will not be taken away by a big crisis in Brighton or elsewhere. They will be there to look after the needs of their communities.

The next issue is the future of those rural communities which we have seen gradually slide away. The nature of those villages remains, externally, as it has done for years, in terms of the character of the houses, the nature of pubs and the fact that we still have many butchers shops in the villages, although they are declining all the time. However, far too many village post offices have closed. Nationwide last year, more than 500 post offices closed in our smaller communities. That is a tremendous loss, not just to the pensioners who depend on them for drawing their pensions each week but to the many people for whom the post office is the life-blood of the local business community. I hope that measures will be introduced during this Parliament, and that the Government will be persuaded during the debate on the Queen's Speech, genuinely to support local village communities.

At the nub of rural communities is farming. We have been incredibly fortunate in East Sussex, in that we have not had a single case of foot and mouth disease, but that does not mean that farming is not in crisis. One half of dairy farmers in the south-east have come out of dairy farming in the last two years. Their farm incomes have declined by 90 per cent. over the past five years. One of the consequences of foot and mouth will be that people who might otherwise have been able to stay in farming will feel that they simply cannot justify the huge disparity between the value of their farmhouse—which is in great demand from people wanting to move into the area—and the income that the farmland can now generate for them.

This House must act urgently to try to make sure that our farmers enjoy a level playing field and are not facing unfair competition from overseas products that do not adhere to the same standards of animal hygiene and animal husbandry. We need good labelling so that consumers who wish to buy British food know that they are genuinely doing so, rather than buying food that may have been reared overseas and simply packaged and processed in this country.

There is nothing in the Queen's Speech that suggests to me that the Government wish to act with regard to the countryside, apart from their knee-jerk reaction on

[Mr. Charles Hendry]

foxhunting. If we do not stand up for farming, the whole fabric of our countryside will be in jeopardy and will be changed for ever.

For me, there could be no greater privilege than to represent the area where I was born, grew up and went for most of my schooling. To come from the area just north of Wealden and now to be the Member of Parliament for the area is something that, as a child, I could only have dreamed about. I know that there are many issues of concern to the constituency, issues about which I care passionately and for which I hope I can be a voice in this House for some time to come. Sir Geoffrey was here for 36 years and looked at the end of it as if he could do another 36 years and not notice the strain. He is a hard act to follow, but I shall do my best to be that voice for this constituency.

7.28 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I wish to concentrate on the final phrase in the amendment, which asks whether the House should have confidence in whether the Government can deliver world-class services. I believe that that is an important challenge to the Government in this period of delivery.

Before doing so, however, I congratulate the three hon. Members whose maiden speeches I have heard: the hon. Members for Wealden (Mr. Hendry), for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and for North Down (Lady Hermon). It was a great pleasure to listen to them, and there was a common theme in all three speeches. It is a humbling experience to realise that so many thousands of people have put a cross against one's name, as that imposes a high degree of responsibility on each of us. I wish all three Members well in their careers.

Can the Government make any real change to our constituents' quality of life? Some progress has undoubtedly been made, but the level of turnout showed that not enough has been done to engage swathes of people in our society. I have no doubt that public services need to be overhauled. The public will believe that we are only tinkering at the edges unless we roll up our sleeves during this Parliament and help change their lives and living conditions.

We have talked about joined-up government for some time, but so far the change has been minimal from the point of view of thousands of people living at or near the poverty line in housing that no Member of this House would choose to inhabit. I would go further and say that very few in this House have ever experienced living in such housing at first hand.

I joined the Labour party 32 years ago because of my dismay at the way in which the public and private sectors addressed the housing needs of decent people. Over those 32 years, I have been a council tenant, I have lived under private landlords who sent the heavies round to collect the rent and am now, fortunately, an owner-occupier living in an historic building. Therefore, I feel qualified to comment. Sadly, not enough has changed in all that time. I have asked myself why that is so, given some of the things that we have all seen in our constituencies. I have come to two conclusions.

First, on the supply side, there are simply not enough houses in some constituencies. In some, as the hon. Member for Wealden said, the controversial point is

whether housing development takes place. In my constituency, the argument is not about the placement of houses but about the quality of accommodation. I give the Government credit for some of the imaginative ways they have looked at the problem over the past four years and intend to do so in the future, as outlined in the Queen's Speech.

My second conclusion is talked about but seldom addressed—namely, that the very machinery of government fails to meet the needs of many people who are disengaging from the political process. I wonder how many colleagues went around rundown estates in their constituency during the election campaign, knowing in their hearts that we have failed to get to the core of the problems facing some areas. Those who voted said, "You're better than the other lot", but many said, "You're all the same. You don't actually make a real difference to our lives." The real problem lies here in London, where the machinery of government has failed to get to grips with the inertia in the system. Unless we genuinely deliver, on a joined-up basis, we will fail.

Why does the process of evaluating the effectiveness of a local housing strategy look only at housing? Best value criteria should be based on the same systems that good cost-centre management apply in the private sector. The cost centre must be able to deliver to its targets but, in making decisions, it must also take into account the best interests of the business as a whole. That is how the private sector operates, but the system seems to be lacking in the Government machine. That is not a new comment—the problem has existed for generations. Not only is such a system lacking, but some public sector managers seem to be resisting it.

I shall give a couple of examples. The first is a diversion from housing. Merseyside fire authority, which serves only one small part of my constituency, has concluded that under its best value rules, it should change the Heswall fire station in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) to day manning. Going ahead may be fine in terms of the Merseyside criteria, but it means additional expenditure for the Cheshire fire authority, which will have to fill the gap. That seems bad business planning on the part of the fire authority. In that example, my first cost-centre requirement is met but the second is entirely ignored.

Let me return to housing. I want my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench to know that I am not hung up on ownership. There is only one principle as far as I am concerned—whether we can deliver decent housing and give citizens the dignity of a decent roof over their head each night. The provider is secondary.

In my constituency, an estate called Parklands used to be full of post-war precast reinforced concrete houses that were falling apart. As a result of an imaginative partnerships between central and local government over a number of years, a massive amount of work has been done to restore the dignity of decent housing and that estate has been changed out of all recognition. The Government have failed to consider the benefits that that investment has had in reducing demands on the police and social services as well as educational pressures. That is what I mean about making sure that in assessing how one cost centre of government operates, one looks positively at a wider range of services.

One can compare that estate with areas of my constituency where no such investment has been made in the recent past. There has been a massive decline in turnout in such places. Not only has there been a better level of turnout in areas where people have been engaged and seen the effect of the Government's delivery, but there has been an improvement in terms of other areas of Government expenditure.

The Government need to look carefully at those areas to ensure that the proposition contained in the amendment is killed off once and for all. The Opposition's premise is false, but Ministers need to make sure that they get to grips with the machinery of government and look at the needs of people on a diverse basis—not as a single cost centre. If they consider matters in that way, we will have success during the part of this Administration's time that concentrates on delivery.

7.38 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I am grateful to have been called to participate in this debate, and delighted to follow the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller). I am pleased that the debate has been of such a high standard.

I am delighted to have been returned for a second term to represent Vale of York. I might not be No. 3 like my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Mr. Hendry), but I am one of the dirty dozen. I had one of the 12 best results for the Conservatives, with an increased majority and a larger share of the vote. I take this opportunity to thank those who voted for me, and I shall continue to represent those who did not to the best of my ability over the next parliamentary term.

I would like to place before the House my interests in this area. I am a member of the public policy committee of the RAC Foundation and, with my brother, a co-owner of a smallholding in Teesdale in the north of England. I hope that that qualifies me to speak. In addition, I represent a largely rural, but partly urban constituency.

I welcome the Secretary of State to her new responsibilities in the Department. The jury is still out as to whether the Government were right to create a new Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I regret the absence of farming in the title and I lament the split of responsibilities—environment and planning have been separated, which could lead to great difficulties for the present Administration. It is not merely a case of changing the brass plate and the Department's title. What we really need, and what was lacking in the previous Government, is the necessary political direction in particular in the midst of the farming crisis, to which I will return.

As I said, we had a successful campaign and I confirm that campaigning is fun. One reason why we did so well is that our local pledges were relevant to the electorate in Vale of York. My first pledge was to obtain a fair deal for farmers and the countryside. My second was to support local pensioners. My third was better standards in schools and hospitals. My fourth was to boost enterprise and services in rural areas, such as transport and rural post offices, and my fifth was to obtain more police to fight rural and street crime.

I am disappointed that farming is not the Government's first pledge. In the past two years in particular there has been an unprecedented crisis in farming. Incomes have

fallen to their lowest levels, the number of jobs lost and people leaving farming is unprecedented and those problems are compounded by foot and mouth disease. Farmers in Vale of York told me that they had never felt so humiliated or neglected as under the Labour Government in the previous Parliament.

Farming and industry related to farming, including rural tourism, are the largest employers in Vale of York. I am delighted and relieved to say that as I speak, although the disease is all around us and presses on every frontier, as yet we have not had a direct outbreak of foot and mouth in Vale of York.

The repercussions for farmers, for those living on the land and for connected industries such as tourism, are unprecedented. The Government must come up with some strategy for recovery in the countryside, not least on business rate relief. I live in Hambleton district and I am appalled. The Government have paid lip service to extending business rate relief to farms and rural businesses, but they must appreciate that district councils such as Hambleton—and, indeed, your district council of Uttlesford, Mr. Deputy Speaker—will already have committed their budgets for this year and are in receipt of no national funds to pay for that largesse. I ask the Government to reconsider and to make such funds available.

I question the Government about why a public inquiry was so pressing after BSE but not equally pressing to investigate how foot and mouth disease started. Perhaps the Minister would like to respond in his reply. The Government have failed to make any reference to farming or the countryside in the Gracious Speech or to produce a strategic recovery programme. They have produced the 20-day standstill rule and, for the second time, I urge them not to implement it. It is most likely that foot and mouth disease emanated from meat that came from abroad. The Government should tackle the need to improve controls on meat and live animal imports. I hope that they will take the opportunity this evening to say that they will do so.

I regret the pressure put on local authorities such as North Yorkshire county council by the Government during the recent general and county council elections to reopen footpaths. The priority must be to eradicate foot and mouth disease. As the Secretary of State said last week, we must prevent any contact between animals and human beings if the disease might spread. I regret the unprecedented and unwelcome pressure that the rural task force put on councils such as North Yorkshire to open footpaths, which is a measure that the Government may yet live to regret.

At the heart of rural life and services are quality of life and the sustainability of the countryside. Rural post offices in Vale of York and elsewhere have been closing at an unprecedented rate. Those post offices offer a lifeline to rural communities. We can only keep rural sub-post offices by enabling them to retain the payment of benefits and pensions after 2003, as 40 per cent. of their income is derived from paying benefits across the counter.

The Secretary of State promised extra police. I challenge her and her deputy who is to respond to the debate to explain who will pay for the extra police. Police numbers will be restored to the levels of 1 May 1997 only by the end of March 2002. Who will pay those salaries when the rural police grant expires after the first year? Answer came there none.

[Miss Anne McIntosh]

Fuel prices have also been at unprecedented levels. We have the most expensive fuel in Europe and yet we remain a major net producer. The on-costs to businesses, to mothers doing the school run, to pensioners and to the delivery of goods and services in rural areas must never be overlooked.

The Government must deliver on their promises. They must improve journey times and the availability of public transport alternatives. Some 68 per cent. of the electorate are motorists and 20 million of us are car owners. I support the RAC call for a road watchdog to ensure that we speed up the introduction of quieter road surfaces, in particular the Sowerby bypass. I urge the Minister to consider that. We also need better quality road signs and street lighting.

Local authority road maintenance funding should be ring-fenced for that sole purpose. I challenge the Minister who will respond to ensure that the detrunking programme that the Government will introduce from 2003 will attract additional funds to the local authorities that must implement it. I hope that we will receive an answer this evening.

We must have better safety management. Railways must be put on the same basis as air traffic with independent rail safety investigations, as is the case for air disasters. I also submit a plea to the Minister to renew Great North Eastern Railway's franchise for the east coast rail route.

In conclusion, I regret the absence of any reference in the Gracious Speech to agriculture and the countryside. I regret that my No. 1 pledge on a fair deal for farming and the countryside is not a pledge that the Government share and also that there are no proposals to assist farming, tourism or the rest of the rural economy to recover from foot and mouth disease. I fear that that bodes ill for the farming community, the countryside and the sustainability of our environment for future generations. I will not cease to remind the Government of their duty to my farmers.

7.48 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): It is always a great pleasure to listen to the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), even though I do not agree with a word that she says. I also pay tribute to the maiden speeches that we have heard today, which have been very good. Hon. Members have kept to the point and I hope that they enjoy this place and will get a warm feeling from their constituents, who are no doubt making a beeline towards their doors at this moment.

I am fortunate to be able to speak in this part of the debate because it covers two of the areas in which I am most interested—those covered by the new Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and transport. I make no apology for focusing on the first subject covered in the amendment tabled by the official Opposition, but I will conclude by saying a little about transport. The Opposition amendment mentions those matters, but does not give a true reflection of what the Government did, nor of what they intend to do now that they have been re-elected with a massive majority.

The Government achieved many good things in respect of the environment. That has not been reported fairly, and the Government have not received the credit that they

deserve. It is an example of what I call the law of reverse spin, which states that the less said about a matter, the more the Government have achieved. The Government stood steadfastly behind the climate change demands placed on all Governments in the western world. The stance taken by the new American President shames the developed countries. It behoves Labour Members and the Government to do something about what might be the biggest peril facing the world. The Government's efforts on the environment will affect other sectors, such as renewable energy, transport strategy and farming and food production.

I could devote my speech to foot and mouth, and the matter has been referred to by several other hon. Members. The old Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was not fondly regarded in many places, and its passing has not been mourned. The new Department is an exciting new hybrid, but I should like to pay tribute to the MAFF officials who worked so relentlessly in the most difficult circumstances when the outbreak was at its height. The temporary veterinary inspectors went out day after day to deal with people in heart-rending difficulty. They did so without reward, and they were given little support by the wider populace, who were reading the inaccurate and emotive headlines in the media. Those headlines did not portray what was really happening, although we know that the outbreak caused great difficulty.

I welcome the announcement that there will be an inquiry into the foot and mouth outbreak. I am happy to include my name among those who support a full and public inquiry which, as well as looking at what happened in practice, should also examine the cause of the disease, and its transmission.

After classical swine fever and bovine tuberculosis, the foot and mouth outbreak was one disease too many. We must learn from the mistakes that have been made in the practice of agriculture and in the funding mechanisms that are available. Those mechanisms cause people to do daft and illegal things, which is why I hope that we will get access to all the background information, including the intelligence reports that have been compiled. That information will enable us to know what caused this dreadful series of events.

I hope that the upshot will be a movement towards establishing a food policy. I have spoken many times in the House about the need for such a policy, and I think that we are moving in that direction. A food policy would not just be about producers, processors and retailers, but about consumers too. It would make clear what consumers should be able to expect, and what they could put back into food production strategies. I hope that consumers can be encouraged to seek higher quality produce of more local origin, even though it might cost more.

I have always said that some of our food is too cheap. I am a Co-operative as well as a Labour MP, and I believe that the best way to take the process of consumer involvement forward is through co-operation. I believe in the principles of co-operation, and the food chain is an ideal arena in which they could be applied successfully and effectively.

I am pleased that the new Department encompasses rural affairs, and I am sure that it will do so in more than name when it gets going. We need to debate the real rural issues that matter to people in rural Britain. That debate

goes far beyond foxhunting. I managed to secure an increased majority at the general election because I talked to local people about what mattered to them rather than about what other people think is important. I talked to my constituents about transport, schools, health and rural poverty—the issues that affect people's everyday lives. We will be missing a golden opportunity if we do not encourage the new Department to get stuck in and deliver what needs to be delivered.

We must tackle the question of how to improve rural services, and work out how to keep shops and other services in place. I was at a meeting in North Nibley in my constituency last night, where villagers are threatened with losing both their shop and post office. It was good to see people in that community coming together to decide whether they could keep those premises open on a voluntary basis. Representatives of the Village Retail Services Association, the voluntary shop movement that has done so much sterling work around the country, were at the meeting. Although running a local post office on a voluntary basis represents a big commitment, we are beginning to see how village people can fight back to ensure that their services remain intact.

Finally, I want to mention transport, the issue around which most of the problems in rural Britain are concentrated. If we can resolve the transport dilemma, much else will follow in train. We must ensure that good quality services are provided in the more deprived rural areas and encourage people of all dispositions to use public transport systems. The Government have done much for rural bus services, but more will have to be done. I support the extension of half-price bus passes to groups other than pensioners, and we must ensure that services are kept running and, in time, improved and made more widely available.

In my constituency, Stagecoach is the dominant provider. I wish that we had more drivers and service administrators. We are putting so much money into those services that we are entitled to expect an improvement. We hear a lot about the public-private business relationship, but it is important that the private sector, as well as receiving the money, should be seen to deliver.

The railways are at the core of the transport links that keep rural communities in communication with each other. I hope that the Government will put much more pressure on Railtrack. For about nine months, I have been trying to arrange a meeting with Railtrack officials. I want to get a local line in my area reopened and improved, but so far I have met with nothing but failure. I hope that the Government will begin to put pressure on Railtrack to deliver in rural Britain—as it should be delivering in the rest of the country.

7.58 pm

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry): I wish to begin by paying tribute to all those hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I have listened with interest and some diligence to many of those speeches, and to the remarks made by other, more seasoned campaigners.

It is customary for a new hon. Member to pay tribute in his maiden speech to his predecessor. My predecessor, Mr. William Ross, was a diligent Member of this House. For many generations, his family has lived and farmed in the East Londonderry constituency. Mr. Ross has done so himself for many years.

When I was growing up in one of the many small terraced houses in the Waterside area of Londonderry in Northern Ireland in the 1960s, I little realised that I, a product of a working-class Unionist family, would one day be elected to this, the Mother of Parliaments.

Like so many of my community, my social conditions were poor, on a par with those of many in other parts of Northern Ireland and in the rest of the United Kingdom. We enjoyed none of the benefits of the so-called Unionist ascendancy. Outside toilets and a lack of bathroom facilities were the rule, not the exception. Our job prospects were bleak. I started work as a shop assistant in 1969. At that time, there were those who started to campaign for what they termed civil rights. Among them were Members past and present of this House. Not only did they make a number of demands but they accused my community of refusing those demands, even though we were in a similar socio-economic plight.

Some ask why we did not join in the campaign to have those demands met. Those who say that do not understand that, from the outset, the campaign was a republican one. It had slogans such as, "Smash the Orange state." The campaign quickly turned violent. Those Members of Parliament who supported it have their own consciences to search for the part that they played in encouraging protest, violence and subsequently murder. They condemned it, but they pocketed the political gains that the violence brought for their community.

The problem in recent years has been that attempts to establish a political system in Northern Ireland have as their genesis the wrong foundation. If Her Majesty's Government continually begin from the starting point that nationalists are always the aggrieved party, they will always get it wrong. That is what is wrong with the present Belfast agreement.

Decommissioning of illegal arms is essential, and it must be begun and completed. Proper accountable democracy in the Assembly must be established. There has to be a Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland liaison with which Unionists as well as nationalists are comfortable. I do not see how any of that is possible within the present framework, but the fundamentals of the approach to solving the problem must be right.

My community is angry, disillusioned, discriminated against and marginalised, not only since the Belfast agreement but for decades before. The 1998 agreement only made matters worse. I am here to work for the revitalisation of that community. In most strata of society in Northern Ireland, Unionists feel that their cultural outlook has been ignored. The Northern Ireland of today is a place where Unionists feel their second-class citizenship acutely. The advantages that nationalists enjoy are considerable. I want to work for a society that all our people feel comfortable in and with.

There are Unionist towns across Northern Ireland, such as Limavady, Kilkeel and Desertmartin, where nationalist parades can and do take place on a traditional basis without any Unionist objection or protest. I want to see that reciprocated for the Orange Order in places such as Garvaghy road in Portadown.

The charge is often made that Unionists are against change. That charge is made by those who seek to further the fallacy that Northern Ireland is a cold house for Catholics. That is utter nonsense. The acceptance of that premise has done untold harm in the past 30 years. Only

[Mr. Gregory Campbell]

when there is a realisation that the Unionist community needs to see its grievances addressed will there be the possibility of widespread acceptance of institutions that can accommodate Unionists. We want to see change. We want change such as—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but his speech is going rather wide of the amendment on the Order Paper for today, which relates to the environment, rural affairs and transport.

Mr. Campbell: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall endeavour to return to that as quickly as I can.

Of course we want to see change. The part of Northern Ireland that I represent is disadvantaged. The rural areas and the urban populations have been considerably disadvantaged. I want to work with all hon. Members in the House to tackle the problems faced by both urban and rural communities.

Future generations in Northern Ireland want to have the same advantages that certain sections of our community have enjoyed for generations. We want to see change in Northern Ireland that will allow the promotion of our community's cultural background in the same way as the nationalist community has had its cultural background promoted and financed.

I want the beautiful north coast in my constituency to be enjoyed by all citizens and visitors from across the globe in true peace and prosperity. The beautiful Roe valley, the wonderful beaches of Castlerock, Downhill and the premier resorts of Portrush and Portstewart make the constituency one of the most beautiful and stunning parts not only of Northern Ireland but of the entire United Kingdom.

In conclusion, I want to see the Government strive for a system of government to which every democrat can give allegiance and support, and in which genuine equality and freedom is accorded to all citizens of my beloved Province.

8.7 pm

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Campbell) on his maiden speech and all other hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. Like the hon. Gentleman, I come from a working-class background. In the past four years, I have listened to him and many of his colleagues in this place, and I have to say that my experiences are fundamentally different from theirs in Northern Ireland. I can only hope and pray that, ultimately, we shall see in Northern Ireland a lasting peace from which all the people of Northern Ireland will benefit.

I am delighted to speak in this debate on the Queen's Speech. I wish to talk about foot and mouth disease and its impact in my area. In Dumfries and the neighbouring constituency of Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, 24 per cent. of GDP is attributed to agriculture. The foot and mouth disease outbreak of the past two or three months has had a real impact on the area. People who believe that they had no real connection with farming soon discovered differently.

Much of the debate in recent weeks and months has centred around agriculture and the impact of the disease on farmers, but others have been seriously affected. Some businesses closed down almost overnight. Those included agricultural contractors and people involved in tourism, which we have grown to realise is closely connected with farming. So foot and mouth paints an extremely bleak picture.

If there is any comfort at all for the people in my area and the neighbouring constituency, it is down to the fact that the disease was handled somewhat better there than in other parts of the country; but there is little consolation for those who are hit hardest. There is a variety of different views on the way in which the situation was handled because, let us not forget, some farmers lost generations of work—burned before their very eyes as the disease hit hard. We are talking about pedigree livestock; bloodlines that could be traced back to the 1850s were lost, never to be recovered. It was extremely hard for these people, but some of them have been quick to come back and I compliment those who were working on the ground, trying to deal with the crisis. I echo some of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), who spoke about the temporary veterinary inspectors who worked hard and with so much dedication to lessen the impact on households and families.

Hindsight is a magnificent thing, and I have never seen as many experts come out of the woodwork as I have in recent weeks and months. Suddenly, everyone had the magic answer of vaccination, which they said should have been used from day one; but obviously, people had different agendas. No one was offering any other real alternative, and I firmly believe that the cull policy was the best way to proceed. That policy is still being carried out on the English side of the border.

The issue started with cross-party consensus, but regrettably, became an election issue. Only two days before polling day, in my area, stories were being spread that vets and slaughtermen were returning on 8 and 9 June to carry out further culling. There was no truth in that. Although the vets did return to my area, it was to carry out the next steps—part of a process of healing and moving forward—of blood testing and placing sentinel cattle in some of our fields. Thus in Dumfries, and in Dumfries and Galloway, we have moved forward significantly.

The prospect of an inquiry has been raised. An inquiry was held in 1967, but regrettably, little was done from that time onwards, which is why, in 2001, we were left somewhat wanting. We should remember that. In 2001, an unprecedented 2,000 animal transportation movements, involving 1.3 million sheep, led to a rapid spread of the disease. Therefore, we need an inquiry, but we also need a follow-up to it—we must consider how we would deal with foot and mouth if it ever arose again, and we must examine procedures every three, four or five years. The inquiry must find out how the outbreak started. I am on public record as saying that, if criminal proceedings have to be brought against any person, or any group of people, we should not be afraid to bring them. We should highlight what was done well and should not be afraid to acknowledge where we got things wrong.

We need explanations for cases that suddenly arose some 30 miles from the nearest previous case. The inquiry should examine traffic movements and vehicle

movements, and the potential for the spread that arose from those. It should consider human movements—people working uncleanly and causing spread.

One of my local newspapers printed a letter from a chap inquiring about mushroom sheep—sheep that had not been there in the evening but had appeared the next morning. Lo and behold, some two or three days later in another part of his neighbourhood, the same thing happened. I am almost convinced, although I cannot be sure, that I witnessed similar happenings. Sheep would suddenly appear in fields where previously there had been nothing. It beggars belief that, throughout this difficult period, people may well have been carrying out illegal livestock movements. Of course there has been rumour and gossip, and the inquiry must get to the bottom of some of that, too.

Is there a role for vaccination? Should vaccine ever be used in the future? We need extensive research and development to ascertain whether it is a possibility.

Foot and mouth never really was an election issue. People's real concerns in rural constituencies are the same as they are in cities and urban areas: they are about the national health service and children's education. The amendment before us talks about "world-class public services". Earlier this year, the Leader of the Opposition appeared at a fund-raising event in my constituency and spoke about policing in the area. He said that he wanted to return police numbers to the figures that stood in May 1997 and crime to 1997 levels. I have news for him: crime has fallen by 5 per cent. The number of uniformed police officers has risen by 42, and the number of civilian staff by 29. I do not think that people in my constituency would want to see a return to the May 1997 figures.

People's real concerns also include transport, and the Tory theory behind bus deregulation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud said, Stagecoach is a major player in my area. I am not convinced, despite all the money that the Government and our local authority have ploughed into public transport, that we are getting the transport provision that we need and deserve.

People are also concerned about affordable housing. Let us never forget that, to many people, affordable housing means an affordable rent.

Let me sum up by saying that some people should not return to farming. I do wonder that there is a healthy situation in my area, where 24 per cent. of GDP is connected to farming. I do not believe that that is healthy. We need to provide support to farmers and communities to ensure that we have a vibrant rural economy. That can happen only when people sit down and discuss the issue as whole rural communities, rather than individual groups within communities.

8.17 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): It would be invidious to mention all the hon. Members who have made excellent maiden speeches this evening. We have seen the capabilities of the new intake of Members of Parliament in the most remarkable way this evening, and I give credit to all of them—but particularly my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), whom I very much welcome to the Liberal Democrat Benches.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) was absolutely right in saying that, to rural areas such as those which he and I represent, what matters in this Parliament

is that the Government should start to deliver in the key areas of social policy. We have been waiting too long for them to do so. Education, health, policing, public transport and the public services on which we depend are also the key issues in other parts of the country.

Overlaying that is the crisis caused by foot and mouth disease, and we in Somerset feel much the same way as the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans). The world has looked aside and the media spotlight is elsewhere; they are no longer interested in foot and mouth. However, there happen to be cases in our area, and those outbreaks are just as important to our agriculture industry and our other businesses as were those in other parts of the country.

The caravan has moved on and we feel forgotten. That cannot be right, which is why the amendment tabled by the Conservative Opposition correctly says that it is remarkable that the Queen's Speech does not address the most pressing issues in rural areas: first, how to effect a recovery in our agriculture industry; and, secondly, and perhaps even more important, how to effect a recovery in all the other businesses that have been affected not only by foot and mouth but by the long-term slowdown in so many of our rural industries and the impact of that on the economy.

I am deeply disappointed that there is no legislation in the Queen's Speech to address that. Furthermore, there is no measure to put into effect the promises made in the rural White Paper and no intention to lead with a recovery plan that will put cash into businesses that desperately need it to put them back on the road to recovery.

It is a paradox of debates on the Gracious Speech that we often discuss not what is included but what has not been included. I have little problem with many Bills in the Queen's Speech and some address issues with which I have sympathy, but I do not find what I want in respect of the core areas of delivery and improved public services. The proposed education Bill is so far removed from the reality of what we need to improve education services in schools and university provision in Somerset as to be laughable.

I welcome the appointment of the new Secretary of State for Education and Skills. She and I have shared many Adjournment debates late in the night, talking about the problems of Somerset education, and she has always shown that she understands the issues. However, I have to tell her that a Bill that deals principally with 57 new varieties of school and labels that will categorise pupils and put them into the various educational establishments without improving any of them—they will be irrelevant in many rural areas, which have monopoly suppliers such as a single secondary school providing an option for an area—is not what we are looking for.

We are looking for reforms of local government finance, and we have been waiting for them for so long. We want a measure that will put right the gross inequities in standard spending assessments whereby a child in Somerset receives £1,500 a year less than a child in a leafy London suburb. That is what we want from the Government, but we do not have it. Yet again, we wait for those necessary reforms.

The system does not provide the new school buildings or the extra teachers that we need and it is making admission policies more difficult. Other hon. Members will know that policies that are intended to be good—

[Mr. David Heath]

I applaud them in terms of class sizes—mean that more pupils are unable to attend a school on their doorstep, so they have to travel a considerable distance to an alternative school.

In the health service, the systems are being messed about, there are no promises of real delivery in the acute services that we need and constituents of mine still have to wait 18 months to get into the Royal United in Bath or into Yeovil general hospital for a simple orthopaedic operation. That is not good enough, and the Government must start to deliver on their promises.

We must begin to address primary care issues. My general practitioners in Somerset are in desperate straits, wondering how on earth they will manage. They are being asked to do more and more with less and less, only to find that the bureaucracy is overwhelming them. That cannot be right either.

We desperately need to address issues of long-term care. Only last week, an elderly persons' home in a neighbouring constituency but on the border of mine, was closed, affecting many of my constituents. People rang my office in tears because their relatives were being told at a week's notice that the home was to close and that they would have to decamp we know not where. We must get long-term care right. We do not have the correct funding or structure to provide long-term nursing or personal care, and that should be a priority for the Government in this Session.

Hon. Members also mentioned housing. We have not got that right. I am still greatly concerned that overstretched social housing in rural areas cannot cope with the people who want to move because their living conditions are grossly unsuitable or their family circumstances have changed. They are stuck. The only way for them to put a roof over their head is to move far away from their friends and relatives—possibly to accommodation that might be unsuitable—simply because the housing stock does not provide what is needed.

Those are important issues. On an additional note, I am concerned about the need to reform this place to make it more relevant to our constituents' needs. That idea has pervaded all discussions about the Queen's Speech. People have talked about the Government holding Parliament in contempt. That has been the case at times, and it continues to be so. However, ways of remedying that lie in our hands as Members of the House. We, too, often hold the House in contempt. Members are often not here to listen to debates. *Prima donnas* waltz in to give their speeches and do not have the courtesy to wait for the next speech before going on to their next engagement. We have also failed to address the problems of Select Committees. We need to consider who serves on them and what powers they have.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is roaming wide of the debate.

Mr. Heath: If we want proper public services, as mentioned in the amendment, we need parliamentary structures that hold the Government to account to maintain them. We do not have those. Our structures lack the spontaneity to enable us to do that. We talk about things that are outside our control, but we often fail to

talk about things that are under our control. We talk about the need to ratify treaties without appreciating the fact that that power is not within our grasp. The House can only deal with legislation that follows from a treaty obligation; the responsibility for ratification lies elsewhere.

The House has to take its responsibilities more seriously. We must make the Executive understand that, unless the House is seen as relevant and is able to hold them to account for providing the services that our constituents need, we are failing in our duties. The public will not respect the House for that and will show their displeasure in the ballot box, as they did at the general election.

8.27 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): South Derbyshire had eight foot and mouth cases earlier this year. Restrictions have only recently been lifted. Indeed, the footpath that runs across my property has only just opened to walkers. The outbreak had a profound impact on the rural economy and the life style in a large part of my constituency.

The outbreak clearly exposed the extremely poor preparation that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food had in place to deal with such a disaster. It would not be reasonable to retort that it could hardly have predicted a disaster on that scale, because we had experienced foot and mouth before. Although a substantial report was written about the last outbreak, the Ministry was, sadly, unprepared for the process that lay ahead. It showed a poor initial grasp of the scale of the crisis and did not bring to bear all the resources that could have been available to control it early enough. Members of the Select Committee on Agriculture in the previous Parliament had the opportunity to question scientific advisers on the management of the disease and their advice about it. I was surprised at the time that elapsed before the key scientific minds who could forecast the path of the disease were engaged in the task.

There are clearly some substantial issues to address and I welcome the fact that there will be a full inquiry into the origins of the outbreak and its handling. I shall want to see what can be learned, and, to be fair, where the criticism should be directed.

One small silver lining was that my constituency received a visit from the Prime Minister. Three farmers in my area, the Archer family—there are Archer family farms in South Derbyshire as well as on the radio programme—the Salts and the Smiths, all had the opportunity to express their views about the way in which the disease had been handled. They complimented the Ministry on some aspects of its handling of the matter locally, as well as handing out some brickbats regarding delayed payments and later, after the outbreak, confusions that had arisen in relation to blood tests, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) referred. Such tests were a necessary part of clearing the disease from our area but were handled slowly, with several mistakes being made.

In many ways the exercise was a test of how public services work in extremis, which brings me to public services in general and how they may be improved—matters which are questioned in the Opposition's amendment. The focus of the Queen's Speech was correctly on the delivery of public service commitments,

and that was the focus of the message given to me by my constituents in South Derbyshire during the election campaign. They expect to see more commitments and they expect them to be delivered more quickly. My task in this Parliament is essentially to help to ensure that that comes about.

Listening to the Queen's Speech and examining in more detail some of the tasks that lie ahead, I had some doubts about how easy some of those changes would be. With regard to NHS reforms, we must recognise that centrally set targets and government by directive have rightly been questioned as the correct way to deliver improvements. They have been shown to be inefficient and demotivating to key workers within that core service.

I regularly meet health service professionals who, while recognising the extra resources which they are starting to see reach front-line services, bitterly resent being told precisely how to spend money and being set targets which they do not regard as the most relevant for their area. We must allow greater discretion for quality services to be established in a local area on the basis of the judgment of local management.

Peeling away some of the layers of NHS management appears to be necessary, but we must recognise that the long drawn-out processes that usually follow understandably absorb far too much of the time and energy of many key managers. That means that the deconstruction of regional health authorities and the health authorities that currently continue to manage many of the financial issues in the health service, and the transfer of those tasks to primary care groups and then to primary care trusts, is a process that will naturally absorb a great deal of energy which perhaps could be devoted to improving public services rather more rapidly. One must also question whether transferring complex negotiations and the management of complex services to primary care trusts, which are, as yet, nascent bodies of limited experience in delivering such key decisions, is a task that will be achieved without significant error and delay.

We need robust processes that will transfer responsibilities rapidly, but we must also be aware that one of the goals is to make savings. Most of those working in the health service are cynical about the savings it is claimed can be made from the reduction of large bureaucracies.

My experience of working in the private sector for a large public company suggests that all large bureaucracies tend to behave like primitive organisms: when a limb is severed, at one point, a replacement grows elsewhere in the organism, sometimes at rather greater cost and inefficiency. Flatter management, while a laudable goal, cannot be achieved painlessly or without extremely skilled management. Given that it does not appear that such experience can be found within many of the public service bodies and Ministries that will be managing the process, one has to voice some concern about that change.

We must re-engineer the way in which we deliver our services. Some useful innovations have already been made, for example, the ONE service in delivering benefits and employment support. However, many parts of our public services continue to operate within the confines of byzantine procedures. We have repeatedly failed to integrate the use of information technology into modern public service. When I visited a hospital just outside my area, I was shown software that was, it was claimed, on

the leading edge; but five years ago in my own business, I would have regarded it as the most basic of database tools. That gives some measure of how slowly IT has been absorbed into a key public service. I noted the gentle reproach from our e-envoy regarding using high-level targets for public access to IT instead of focusing on the big issue of transforming key public services through the use of IT.

In education, while commending the development of specialist schools, I would argue that we need to strengthen networks between local schools. To give a local example, I cannot understand why in Swadlincote, a town in my constituency with three secondary comprehensives but only one sixth form, allowing competitive specialties would be harmful.

To return to the putative subject of today's debate—the establishment of the new Department—we must review the top management of our public service. The new Department must break the cracked mould of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food: it will be alarming if the new adopts the culture and leadership of the old. Our rural economy needs new strategies based on markets, customers, quality and environment, not on the legacy of the previous Ministry.

8.37 pm

David Burnside (South Antrim): It is appropriate for me to participate in the debate on rural communities and transport in the context of the Queen's Speech. I want all those who have not yet done so to travel into Ulster, because it is more likely than not that they would fly into the international airport in my constituency, which lies at the heart of Ulster. They can take the airline of their choice because there is such a good selection of them—I prefer British Airways, which still does a fair job, even though it is not quite the airline it was when Lord King and I were running it.

I shall stop the aircraft 30,000 ft up and take a look around my constituency, because it is an attractive place, as is the whole Province. It is a big rural constituency with considerable industry and commerce, which lies 10 miles from Belfast lough. To the west at Toome, the River Bann—a great salmon river—runs out of Lough Neagh, where most of the eels that are eaten in Europe come from. The area is an untapped tourist attraction, but it is totally underdeveloped, so I intend to work on that one for the community of South Antrim and, indeed, for all of Northern Ireland.

Move eastward, through Randalstown and Antrim to Ballyclare, and turn south to Mossley, one of two big local government areas. Our local government headquarters are in Mossley Mill: local councillors did not, as they sometimes do, knock down the old and build a new and disgusting office block; instead, they took an old 19th-century mill and turned it into the headquarters of Newtownabbey council. That is something that I like.

Move further south and, on the fringes of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Dorfaldson) is the legendary Dundrod circuit. Dundrod, with the mountain course on the Isle of Man are two of the great road circuits in the history of autosport, now road motor cycling.

Beside Dundrod is Nutt's Corner, which is in my constituency, where there is a small race track, which I hope, in co-operation with Members of the Assembly,

[David Burnside]

we will develop as a centre for motor sport excellence in Northern Ireland. I would like it to be named the Joey Dunlop memorial circuit since Joey Dunlop came from my home town of Ballymoney in County Antrim. Up with Mike Hailwood, he is the greatest motor cycle road racer of all time. He died in Estonia last year.

I turn to my predecessors. I thank the Rev. William McCrea for looking after the interests of South Antrim in the eight months since he defeated me at the by-election; I won at the general election. I thank him for his service, as I am sure the House does. Willie still holds many public positions in Mid-Ulster, including in the local council. He has stood for many constituencies. I do not know where he will pop up next, but no doubt he will.

I go further back. I have known the past four hon. Members for South Antrim, including Sir Knox Cunningham. I met him at a small meeting in Ormeau park in the early 1970s—it was small by Ulster standards: about 100,000 people were in the park. He was a big man, as all the Cunningham family were, and are. A boxing champion at Cambridge and an impressive man on the platform, he had presence.

Sir Knox was succeeded by someone who older hon. Members should know well: Jim Molyneux, who is in the other place now. For many years, Jim represented the old big constituency, which we still call—we are a bit old fashioned—the imperial constituency of South Antrim. He is a great parliamentarian. When the constituency was split because of increased representation, Jim went to Lagan Valley and Clifford Forsythe succeeded him.

Clifford was the quiet man of the Ulster Unionist party. He was well known in the House and highly respected. He was a great footballer in the 1950s. He played for Linfield at Windsor Park and for Derry City at the Brandywell. In modern terminology, that would be called parity of esteem. He served South Antrim very well. Unfortunately, he died—it surprised us all—at the age of 70, leaving a widow, Lillian.

I have many things to say about the big issues in Ulster: the agreement and the Royal Ulster Constabulary. I will bide my time. It is a great honour to make a maiden speech. I am not really a career politician. I tried to win the by-election, when we failed, but we won the seat back against the trend at the general election.

I will be a Member of Parliament who represents the local issues in my constituency. In the Chamber, I will try to represent, with my colleagues in the Ulster Unionist party, the needs of Northern Ireland. We are not Protestant Sinn Féin. We are the Ulster Unionist party and we will regain and strengthen our position as the leaders of Ulster Unionism.

I will also speak on and debate subjects in the House that affect the whole of the United Kingdom because I am a Unionist. There are Englishmen, Scotsmen, Welshmen, Ulstermen, Irishmen—they choose the term depending where they are—but we are all Unionists and the unity of the kingdom means a great deal to me.

8.44 pm

Ian Stewart (Eccles): Let me first explain that my normally robust Salford voice is somewhat weaker this evening, as I carried out my duties last night as the

manager and chief cheerleader of the House of Commons tug-of-war team, which achieved a magnificent victory over the House of Lords team for the first time ever.

I congratulate the hon. Members for South Antrim (David Burnside), for East Londonderry (Mr. Campbell) and for Wealden (Mr. Hendry) on their maiden speeches, which they have made while I have been in the Chamber. They articulated their concerns and their vision for their constituencies with clarity. That bodes well for their advocacy on behalf of their constituents in the future.

I wish to confine my comments to transport. I was very pleased to serve on the Committee that considered the Transport Act 2000, under which concessionary fares for the elderly were introduced nationwide. In my area, the Greater Manchester passenger transport authority amended its travel concession scheme, with effect from 1 April 2001. Following wide consultation, the authority has introduced a new scheme whereby concessionaires will pay the flat-rate fare or a half fare, depending on whichever is cheapest for the journey. Therefore, the concessionary fare paid will be reduced for many local journeys.

From 1 April, the flat concessionary bus fare has been 40p, and the flat fare for the Ring-and-Ride accessible transport service and Metrolink have been 45p off peak. From 20 May this year, the flat-fare concession for off-peak journeys on local trains has been 45p. I commend the Government for their speedy action to ensure that men and women qualify for concessionary fares at the age of 60. I also commend the Greater Manchester passenger transport authority for its innovative and effective policies.

The Strategic Rail Authority was established under the Transport Act 2000, so I wish to say in passing that I hope that the authority will, when deciding which company should run the new trans-Pennine express franchise, heed the words to me of one of the new Under-Secretaries of State, who said that the authority must:

“be satisfied that the successful bidder has the vision to bring about a step change in quality and the capacity to deliver, whilst offering better value for money”.

I hope that the SRA also gives due weight to the views of the Greater Manchester passenger transport authority on that matter.

There have been a number of public transport improvements in my constituency, Eccles, in the past few years, including the Metrolink extension and new quality bus corridors. The Greater Manchester passenger transport authority has planned further improvements for the local public transport network. I have been working closely with the authority on those improvements, and I shall do whatever I can as a Member of Parliament to support and advance the authority's work.

People want affordable and reliable public transport—and, of course, they want it to be safe. The conclusions of the Cullen report on track and signal maintenance and on the need for effective training and induction programmes for drivers must be heeded.

I want to refer briefly to bus services. The Greater Manchester passenger transport authority is concerned about bus service provision. In recent years in some areas, there has been a reduction in the level of service and an increasing tendency to withdraw services from areas and estates designated as suffering from anti-social behaviour. That is a problem in my constituency, where some estates

have had their bus services withdrawn. I accept, however, that buses have been stoned on some occasions on one estate. I do not expect drivers to be put at risk of injury, but bus companies should not delete services without consultation with local communities or relevant agencies. We must all work together to find a solution. It is not a transport problem with social implications; it is a social problem with transport implications.

If social inclusion is a national aim, bus companies have their responsibilities. Labour legislation introduced quality bus partnerships and other important measures, but we must be flexible and consider other measures that may be necessary to deliver quality bus services for old and young alike.

The Opposition like to paint themselves as the motorists' friend, but Labour is investing in both roads and the local environment. Labour has enabled the Highways Agency to improve the safety and the environment of families in my constituency, who have lived with noise and accidents on the M602 for too long. Changes to regulations introduced by the Labour Government mean that work can be done on more sites that are seriously affected by noise. For example, work is well under way to erect a noise barrier where the motorway crosses Parrin lane in the village of Winton, and it should be completed in July.

There is a debate to be had on the quality and substance of protection on motorways that is afforded by barriers. Should the barriers be made of current materials or should they be made of concrete? The debate should take place because there are pros and cons. Current materials allow cars and other vehicles to go through the barriers. In the Parrin lane area in my constituency, for example, over the past two years cars have gone off the motorway and fallen on the road below on three occasions. There has been danger to life and limb.

In policy terms, should the Government decide to use concrete barriers, which would force cars and other vehicles back on to the motorway? There is no easy answer to such issues and there needs to be further debate in the House.

I first raised the issue of the Cadishead Way bypass in my village of Cadishead and Irlam in my maiden speech in 1997, and I have raised it regularly with different Ministers since then. Transport Ministers had quite a high turnover in the previous Parliament, and a number received promotion. I hope that I shall shortly be meeting the newly appointed Minister for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Warley (Mr. Spellar). I hope that he will be the last Minister for Transport that I have to meet on the matter.

The Tories failed to deliver a Cadishead Way bypass after 18 years of government. Labour is committed to improving our transport infrastructure and is putting up the money to make a real difference. Last year, the Government's 10-year transport plan promised a £180 billion package of public and private investment. We are investing in rail, local transport and roads.

I am very pleased that Salford council and the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities have given the Cadishead Way bypass a high priority in their new transport development plan. Perhaps this year its time has come. If not, I shall be boring the House again this time next year.

8.54 pm

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I tend to the view that representing a constituency such as Orkney and Shetland, I can probably lay a better claim than many hon. Members, if not most, that mine is truly a rural constituency, and one that by virtue of its geography gives rise to more transport issues than can really be properly addressed in a 10-minute speech. There will, of course, be future debates in which those issues can be raised, and I give the House fair warning that I fully intend to do so.

It is traditional in this House to pay tribute to one's predecessor. It occurs to me, having observed the debate on the Queen's Speech over the past few days, that this is perhaps a tradition which it is open to some hon. Members to observe through gritted teeth and with their fingers crossed behind their back. I consider myself particularly fortunate to have had two Liberal predecessors—which makes me unique as a Liberal MP in this House—to whom I can pay fulsome and handsome tribute.

The late Lord Grimond of Firth, or Jo Grimond, as he was better known in the House and the constituency, served as the Member of Parliament for Orkney and Shetland between 1950 and 1983. He was leader of the Liberal party for 11 of those years, and the fact that he remains a substantial figure, regarded in the communities of Orkney and Shetland with great respect and affection, is an eloquent tribute to the many great statesmanlike qualities that he possessed.

I am acutely aware that Jo Grimond joined a parliamentary party of five Liberal Members in this House, and that it is my privilege to be a member of a parliamentary party of 52. It was Jo Grimond who really started the long, slow haul back for Liberalism in Scotland. Of course, that was not an event but a process, and in 1983 the mantle of that process was handed on to my immediate predecessor, Jim Wallace.

Jim Wallace served the constituency of Orkney and Shetland with remarkable diligence and distinction for the past 18 years. I consider myself particularly fortunate still to have readily available to me his active participation and counsel, as he remains the Member of the Scottish Parliament for Orkney, as well as being its Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice.

When Jo Grimond made his maiden speech in the House, he described our constituency of Orkney and Shetland as

"two little worlds of their own, far away between this country and Norway, very different from each other even in their own land and their own economic affairs, but certainly very different from things down here."—[*Official Report*, 10 March 1950; Vol. 472, c. 626.]

That is as true today as it was in 1950.

Our staple industries remain farming and fishing, and they face many of the difficulties that are born well beyond Orkney and Shetland. Again, there will no doubt be future occasions when I shall be able to discuss those difficulties in the House. More recently, we have seen a much greater dependence on the oil industry, with the substantial oil terminal facilities at Sullom Voe and at Flotta. In recent years, we have also seen the growth of aquaculture in the constituency.

Many hon. Members have no doubt enjoyed holidays in either Orkney or Shetland. They will be aware of the warmth of the welcome that the people offer, and the

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spectacularly, sometimes breathtakingly, beautiful scenery that our islands have to offer. I urge those hon. Members who have not yet availed themselves of the opportunity of visiting my constituency to do so as soon as possible. I ask them not to be put off by air fares that might take them to the other side of the world, should they be inclined to go there.

I also ask hon. Members not to be put off by the fact that planes travelling to and from Orkney and Shetland have a nasty habit of "going technical"—as the ground staff have to put it—suspiciously often when only three or four passengers are booked to travel on them. Hon. Members should also not be put off by the fact that when they get there, they will be charged an extra 10p to 15p a litre of petrol compared to the cost on the mainland. I assure hon. Members that these are all mere distractions that we shall resolve in time, and that it is worth taking the trouble to get there.

I approach this speech today with an acute sense of my part in a long history of radical Liberal tradition from Orkney and Shetland. In the 19th century, we suffered, like so many parts of the highlands and islands, at the hands of landlordism—landlords who exercised draconian powers from a great distance with no consideration for the needs or wishes of the local communities. For many people, that caused tremendous hardship and suffering that ended only with Gladstone's Crofting Act 1886, which introduced security of tenure and shifted the balance from favouring the landlord to favouring local people.

As we enter the 21st century, there seems to be a clamant need for a new Crofting Act, but this time a Crofting Act of the sea bed. Hon. Members who are students of history will find disturbing echoes of 19th-century landlordism in the Crown Estate Commission's treatment of the sea bed and the surrounding communities who rely on it. The words "remote, imperious, unresponsive and having no regard for islanders' wishes" spring to mind.

It is expected that, this year alone, the Crown Estate Commission will take £1 million from the fish farming industry in Shetland alone. Fish farmers in my constituency and elsewhere face a levy that is based, uniquely, not on area but on production. It has made the difference between a business breaking even and a business going into the red. It is a payment for which no service is given in return.

Another example of such unfairness is the project currently being promoted by the Shetland Islands council charitable trust to lay a fibre optic cable from Shetland through Orkney to the Scottish mainland. Such a cable would allow my constituents proper access to the electronic communications that the constituents of other hon. Members undoubtedly take for granted and would immensely benefit my constituency. Hon. Members can therefore imagine our frustration at discovering that our operating costs of £100,000 annually are likely to be increased by no less than another £64,000 annually, simply for the privilege of laying the cable on the sea bed. There is something profoundly obnoxious and objectionable about a system that allows the extraction of money from island communities for the right to use the sea bed. Although we, with our need for piers and harbours, cannot exist without that sea bed, it is of no use to anyone else.

In the general election campaign there was a great deal of talk about stealth taxes, but I believe that the Crown Estate Commission's levies and rents are the oldest and most obnoxious form of stealth tax. They are a relic of our feudal past and the time has come for them to go.

It is my privilege to represent in the House a constituency that is independently minded and deeply self-reliant. I have not been sent here to ask for any special favours, and I am not here to beg for any handouts; I am here merely to ask that my constituents be allowed the same opportunities to develop the potential of their communities that are given to other hon. Members and their constituents in the rest of the country. It is a case that is based on simple fairness and equality of opportunity. It is my devout hope that any case so based will always be well received.

9.4 pm

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): May I say what a pleasure it is to follow the elegant maiden speech by the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael)? He has a long line of illustrious predecessors to live up to, but everything that he said, and the way in which he said it, indicates that he too will make a very significant mark in this place.

It was good to hear about the delights of Orkney and Shetland and South Antrim. Every speech I make in this place tends to be a travelogue about Lancaster and Wyre, which is the most glorious constituency in the land. However, it is good to know that if I did not have an imminent date with a hot Greek beach very early in August, I would have two such excellent alternatives for holidays. Orkney and Shetland and South Antrim will have to go down for future breaks.

It is a particular pleasure to speak in this debate because Lancaster and Wyre is a very rural constituency—the 44th most rural in the country, according to the Library. I am the first Labour Member of Parliament ever to be re-elected for any part of the constituency where the boundaries have changed considerably, certainly not to Labour's advantage, over recent decades. It is good to be back representing such a rural constituency.

Let us not beat about the bush. Our rural areas and particularly our agriculture industry have faced the hardest of hard times in recent years. The Government came in in 1997 with the appalling legacy of BSE. Since then, farmers have had desperate times; they have seen very low prices, huge falls in prices and difficult times. Now we have the dreadful occurrence of foot and mouth disease.

My constituency has had two cases of foot and mouth disease, which have been devastating for those concerned and their neighbours, but the whole area has suffered from the restrictions that have been put in place. At the moment, the area lives in what can only be described as fear, given the proximity of foot and mouth in the Ribblesdale valley. No human being who has come into contact with people involved in farming in recent years could fail to be moved by the distress of that community. It is a strong community, but it is facing appalling times.

In that context, how did a Labour Member come to be re-elected in a constituency where Labour has not been strong in the past and where that rural community has faced such difficult times? It is instructive that the rural area that I represent has benefited from the Government's

investment in education and village schools. Kirkland and Catterall school in my constituency received £500,000 only a few months before the election to deal with major repairs and redevelopment that had originally been plotted in 1976. In 1997, that school finally got the money.

There is also the horrendous problem of the moss roads in my constituency—roads built across the marsh, which have been neglected for years and are in danger of being closed, cutting off rural communities. Under the Government's investment in highways, we now have a three-year, £4 million plan to reconstruct and redevelop those roads, relinking rural communities and rural businesses.

We also have the Garstang Super 8, the future of rural public transport—flexible and accessible. A minibus based in Garstang, it covers the rural area to the east and west in a figure of eight and supplies an excellent service six days a week to villages that had been completely denuded of public transport during the 18 years of the previous Government.

During the Government's first term, there was a lot of scaremongering from the Opposition about the future of parish councils. My opponent at the general election told people that they were about to be abolished. That is not going to happen—instead, the role of parish councils will be strengthened in terms of planning and developing, and in terms of transport improvement, finance and support.

Pilling, in my constituency, is one of the largest villages in England. Local people have developed the Pilling appraisal—their own planning document which, as well as being an interesting and powerful record of what Pilling is like in 2001, will be an important tool for planning in the future.

We have great hopes for the future in Lancaster and Wyre. Myerscough college is one of the major agricultural colleges in the country. The area has also seen the development of farmers markets, co-operatives and farm shops, with people selling produce over the internet. The future of quality produce is very good.

We have the possibility of developing sports facilities in Over Wyre as a result of the Government's neighbourhood programme. We also have the possibility of developing the facilities of Garstang as a market town. Important initiatives are coming from the north-west region, such as regional planning guidance and rural development programmes. However, there are still real difficulties in farming. Only yesterday I was at Claughton Green farm, talking to Mr. Alf Noblett, one of my constituents, and some of his colleagues. It is instructive that they are not asking for more money from the Government. They recognise that the Government have made a huge investment in farming over the past four years. However, I would second their wish that we should be more robust about the future of British farming, the quality of British produce, some of the strictures from Europe and regulations on imports. They want us to be particularly robust in relation to supermarkets and dairy companies. I do not believe that British farmers and the farmers of Lancaster and Wyre get a fair deal. It is essential that the Government stand up for them.

Lancaster is a great, historic city with a wonderful economic future, but it is bedevilled by transport problems. It needs a sustainable integrated transport plan. We need substantial investment in a bypass, park-and-ride schemes, public transport, a range of facilities to improve safety in

home zones, and many other measures to reduce car parking. We need to take a radical approach to enhance the city of Lancaster and its advantages of art, culture, history and economic development with the safe, sustainable, clean and green transport system that it deserves.

9.14 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): For an institution that is meant to be held lower and lower in public esteem, tonight has been remarkable for the number of speeches by people who have been prepared to take ever lengthier steps to attain office in this House.

I pay tribute first to my hon. Friend the Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Duncan), who ably made his maiden speech. He gracefully paid tribute both to his Scottish National party predecessor and to Ian Lang, who is now my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Lang. My hon. Friend described his constituency as "Scotland in miniature". I know that part of the kingdom well, having often visited relations and cousins there. From his personal form and substance, I think that he will be representing Scotland at large from the Conservative Benches. Clearly, he has much to contribute and I commend his confidence that he is the advance party for many more Conservative Members from that great nation of Scotland.

We heard many other maiden speeches, for example from the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Ms Munn), with her pleasant toothy smile. Her self-deprecating humour belied the seriousness of purpose with which she approached the subject of adoption. We look forward to hearing more from her.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) also made a maiden speech, as did the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor), who brings to the House an authentic voice that is a challenge to us tired old clapped-out professional politicians—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I notice that that remark got the most authentic cheers from the Liberal Democrats. We look forward to hearing more about what the hon. Gentleman represents. He is a lesson to us all.

We also heard maiden speeches from the hon. Members for Angus (Mr. Weir), for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael). There was a spate of speeches from the Province of Northern Ireland—from the hon. Members for East Londonderry (Mr. Campbell), for South Antrim (David Burnside) and for North Down (Lady Hermon).

We had extra, sub-maiden speeches from other hon. Friends. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell) is best remembered for the advice that he took about seconding the Loyal Address himself, when he was told that it was always proposed by some clapped-out old has-been and seconded by some oily young man on the make. He did not tell us which category he now fits into.

I regret missing the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Mr. Hendry), but I gather that he was among many hon. Members who mentioned foot and mouth disease. It is incumbent on the Secretary of State, who opened the debate but is not in her place—

The Minister for Transport (Mr. John Spellar): Come on.

Mr. Jenkin: I know the reason why and I certainly do not denigrate the right hon. Lady for that. I ask the

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hon. Gentleman to forgive me if he misunderstood me. However, I hope that she will take on board the fact that the hon. Members for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson), for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) and my hon. Friends the Members for Ribbles Valley (Mr. Evans), for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) and for Wealden all raised concerns about the effects of foot and mouth on farming and the rural economy.

It is not satisfactory for the Government to continue to dismiss the demands for a proper public inquiry into why it happened and how it was dealt with. It is not sufficient to explain that because the Conservatives did not clamour for an inquiry into BSE, there should be no inquiry into foot and mouth. That is the worst sort of tit-for-tat politics, which does this place no good.

I had hoped to begin the debate by welcoming the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions to his new post. The papers were quick to report last week that, unlike his predecessor, he does not drive two Jaguars—in fact, he does not drive at all, as he does not have a driving licence. We have gone from two Jags to a man who travels on two feet. Personally, I favour two wheels, but I look forward to debating with the new Secretary of State when he has the courage to appear at the Dispatch Box.

Instead, I welcome the new Minister for Transport. It is a pleasure to see him. I owe him a great debt as he arranged my pair—not that it has been much use in recent years. He comes from the Ministry of Defence, where he was Minister of State for the Armed Forces. I fear that after a few weeks in his new post he will hanker for the halcyon days in the Ministry of Defence, which will seem like a charmed life compared with the mess that he inherits in this Department.

In a pre-election audit of the Government's record, Anatole Kaletsky in *The Times* gave the Government nought out of 10 for transport and his was not the only voice to attack their record. In January, the Prime Minister's environmental adviser said:

"I think it is fair to say we really aren't moving forward in transport policies; we are probably moving backwards."

The normally pro-Labour commentator Polly Toynbee wrote:

"What the people who voted Labour for the first time in 1997 cared most about was better public services. Expectations had been raised, only to be dashed when nothing much happened or, as with transport, things evidently got worse."

The normally obedient Lobby fodder raised dissenting voices. The hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) said in January:

"The bit where I am probably most disappointed is like the rest of the country—transport. I think we needed to address that early."

The hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) said in March:

"I think that if there is to be a second term of Labour Government, we have to get public transport right. I think we have been given the benefit of the doubt over the railways so far but I don't think that will be the case in the second term."

The Minister would do well to heed those words. That is the problem facing him as he gets to grips with his new portfolio.

The Government have been given a second chance. They said that they needed more time, but now they must prove that they are worth their second chance. They must face the obligations that fall on them, and there can be no more excuses.

The amendment makes reference to the fact that specific measures to improve transport are noticeable by their absence from the Gracious Speech. It also states that the Prime Minister promised, before the general election, that Labour was committed to creating "world-class public services". I wonder whether the fact that transport was downgraded in the reshuffle reflects the Government's anxiety about their ability to deliver on transport.

Labour's first four years do not inspire much confidence. As the Minister is new to his job, perhaps I can remind him of the Government's record. Few people would be brave enough to say that the Government made much progress towards a world-class transport system in their first term. In 1997, a litre of petrol cost about 59p, and it costs 80p now. The amount of tax taken from road users has increased by £9 billion over the past four years.

What the travelling public get for that extra tax? Annual investment in roads is down. It touched the 1997 level of £1.4 billion in only one of the past four years. Between 1992 and 1997, the Conservative Government averaged investment of £1.78 billion a year. None of our major competitors invests so little in roads as Britain. Britain now has the worst traffic jams in Europe, and our roads are in their worst condition since the mid-1970s.

Labour's roads policy has hardly been consistent. The Government were elected in 1997 on a wave of anti-roads sentiment. The Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State, who was then responsible for transport, gleefully slashed more than 100 schemes and bypasses from the national roads programme in England and Wales. By the end of the previous Parliament, the Labour Government were trumpeting their intention to deliver 100 new bypasses as part of their 10-year transport plan.

I notice that the hon. Member for Streatham (Keith Hill), a Transport Minister in the previous Government, is standing behind the Speaker's Chair, smiling sheepishly. Well may he do so.

Labour's roads policy is a conundrum. Urgent schemes such as the A3 at Hindhead were scrapped, but they are now back in the programme. Before there are too many cheers, I should tell the House that its construction is not now due to start until 2007, which is after the expiry of this Parliament. Is that because the Government have wasted their first four years in office?

There is similar chaos in the policy on motorway widening schemes. When they were first elected, the Government dubbed such investment "motorway madness", and scrapped all such schemes. As the system ground to a halt, business cried out for investment. When the Confederation of British Industry complains about the costs of congestion, it is champing not for cuts in the roads programme but for increased investment in it.

The 10-year transport plan was launched with proposals for increases in capacity on motorways such as the M1 and M6. That means that the Government wasted their first four years.

Andrew Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that his speech is a pretty poor

recycling of his election speech and that the country has passed judgment on that? Would it not be far better to move on and come up with something positive?

Mr. Jenkin: I do not think that 2 million fewer votes for the Labour party was much of a positive endorsement.

Why does the Minister not simply answer the questions? What specific widening schemes and by-passes are outlined in the transport plan? When will they commence and when will they be completed? The Government cannot say because they have so few firm plans, even after four years in government.

The chaos in policy on the roads is all the more obvious on the railways. The Government allowed public support for the railways to decline from £2 billion in 1996-97 to a mere £1.5 billion last year. At the start of the last Parliament, it was reported that the Prime Minister told his colleagues, just days after the 1997 election: "the railways are not a priority."

The House can hardly complain that the Government failed to deliver on that promise.

The Government inherited a railway industry that had reversed the decline in passenger numbers and rail freight, and doubled annual investment. Moreover, the figures show that punctuality and reliability had improved. The industry was poised for what Ministers themselves claimed would be a "railway renaissance". Today, the industry's morale and financial confidence is in a state of collapse, and it is crying out for additional Government support. The solution is that the Government be positive about what has every potential to be a dynamic, exciting and growing industry.

Let us hope that we have seen the last of a Secretary of State behaving like a spoilt child, stamping all over his train set in a tantrum every time something goes wrong. What industry could possibly function under the constant political barrage from Ministers and regulators to which the railway industry has been subjected? The last thing that the industry needs is for Labour to start giving in to its left-wing friends in the unions and the Liberal Democrats who long for renationalisation of the railways.

It is all about the politics of blame. In the comments of the hon. Members for Bath (Mr. Foster) and for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), the old left's insatiable appetite for the politics of blame lives on. What has all that blame achieved? The Government should end the policy of blaming and shaming the rail industry. They should promote a positive and favourable climate for the rail industry. They should help it make the changes that are needed instead of criticising from the sidelines, and should promote the financial confidence of the industry instead of gloating over its demise.

The Government have made a grave and irresponsible error in allowing the debate about rail safety to become a vehicle for political point scoring. I commend the first part of the Cullen inquiry into Paddington to the House. It is brutal in its analysis. It pulls no punches and provides no comfort for those who want to blame safety failures on privatisation. Lord Cullen's criticisms go far wider than Railtrack. He lists failures of procedures, training, communication and culture. That includes the railway inspectorate and the Health and Safety Executive, and goes back far beyond the date of privatisation.

The track layout and signalling was designed and laid out before privatisation. It was approved by the HSE and the railway inspectorate, which had not been privatised.

Let the debate be free of political prejudice. Civil aviation is a private, competitive, fragmented, profit-driven industry yet no air accident has for decades led to the ideological dispute that we have seen since Paddington. Part II of the Cullen report will offer structural and methodological reforms of rail safety that are likely to take much from aviation. So I welcome the one mention of rail in the Gracious Speech—the Government's commitment to implement Cullen's recommendations.

Mr. Spellar: Does the hon. Gentleman think that the privatisation of the rail industry was well handled by the previous Tory Government?

Mr. Jenkin: I am happy to quote the words of the former Transport Minister, the hon. Member for Streatham, who talked about dramatic improvements in customer focus, an explosion of innovation and the growth of investment, and I am very happy to quote the former Secretary of State, who made it absolutely clear that he was not going to turn the clock back. I suggest that the Minister start explaining that to his Back Benchers and to the trade unions; otherwise, the industry will continue to go down the plughole and he will have to take responsibility for that.

Only when this debate is free from political prejudice can Labour hope that the money allocated for the railway in the 10-year plan will be well spent. Can the Minister otherwise explain, if he is listening, how it will be possible to raise the £35 billion of private money outlined in the 10-year plan while Railtrack's share price dives out of the FTSE 100?

I have just one central question for the Minister about railways. What are the Government going to do? It is no longer a string and sealing-wax operation to get them through the general election; the rail recovery plan was just that. We can no longer have a Minister sitting in Railtrack house once a week, trying to keep the trains running on time. It is time for the Government to have a strategy for rail, and that is obviously what they do not have.

Let us consider tonight's *Evening Standard*: "New crisis on railways as industry chief says he will quit". That headline refers to the Government's own appointed director of the Strategic Rail Authority. The article says:

"Sir Alistair used his announcement at a rail industry conference in London to attack the Government for hindering his efforts by not providing sufficient funding. He said the 'Whitehall machine made a serious mess'."

That is an indictment not from someone whom a Conservative Government appointed, but from someone whom this Government appointed to help with the future of the railway.

But nothing more dramatically demonstrates Labour's transport failure than the failure of transport in London. The Conservatives completed the Victoria line and the docklands light railway. We initiated the Jubilee line extension, the docklands light railway extension, the Heathrow express, Thameslink 2000 and the Croydon tramlink, but what has Labour done in its first four years?

How many projects did Labour start, let alone complete, in its first four years? Can I tell the House? Not one. While the Conservatives put new trains on the

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Central and Northern lines, refurbished many others and completely renewed the Central line, what has Labour done for the tube? How many new trains under Labour? Not one. How many refurbished trains under Labour? Not one. Not a single line upgrade, not a single refurbished train. The tube is the crowning failure of Labour's transport policy.

What will happen in this Parliament? Perhaps the Minister would like to tell the House. Four years were wasted on the failed public-private partnership. It was due originally in March 1999, and then it was meant to be signed in April 2000, and then in April 2001, and now in September 2001, but industry sources now say that it will not be completed until April 2002. So when, if ever, will the PPP be completed?

The future of Mr. Bob Kiley is now at stake. First he was denigrated by the Government in a briefing war. Then he was appointed and put in charge of the negotiations with the contractors for the PPP. Now he is the victim of off-the-record briefings from the Government about his failure to complete those negotiations. What is his future, and what was the outcome of his meeting with Ministers last week?

Does the Minister accept that the PPP that he has inherited is widely regarded across academic circles, business, industry and the transport industries as botched, and will he work with Transport for London to deliver a sensible plan for a modern underground, instead of against the elected representatives of Londoners, whom the Government themselves put in place to carry out the function of running the underground? What will the Government do about the rising level of strikes, not just on the underground, but on public transport as a whole? Will the Minister take a tougher line with the militants than his RMT-sponsored forebears?

We do not shrink from congratulating the Government on their fresh majority. I congratulate them—[Interruption.] Show some grace. I congratulate them all the more on the silent contrition with which they greeted their victory. Their embarrassed silence spoke volumes. Labour knows that it failed to deliver. Its first term was blessed with opportunities rarely, if ever, enjoyed by a new Administration, not least a golden economic inheritance, a massive mandate from the electorate and the continuing good will of the electors.

The Government wasted their first term, however, squandering the opportunities that they were given four years ago. Though they have been given a second chance, they have a lesser mandate and the public are less trustful than before. All politicians must be concerned at the low turnout at the election. The ruthless raising of expectations followed by an abject failure to deliver has created a new despair about the process of politics in our nation. Transport is one of Labour's great failures. The Government have promised to make it a great success; we shall hold them to that promise.

9.36 pm

The Minister for Transport (Mr. John Spellar): Rather than make ungracious comments such as those of the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), I wish to convey to the House the apologies of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs. As Members will be only too well aware from her introductory speech, she has a serious problem with her throat and, quite properly, has left to take medication. I am sure that the House will understand.

The hon. Member for North Essex kindly referred to my previous incarnation as a Defence Minister. Indeed, I was an Opposition defence spokesman for two years, so I spent six years with the brief. As I said to the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen conference, I am coming to terms with meeting people in uniform who do not salute me. There are other differences. One is that I am never short of free advice on how to handle the portfolio.

The debate has been interesting, not just in terms of the subject, but because we have heard some excellent contributions from almost a tide of new Members. However, new Members should always be cautious about those who offer them congratulations on their speeches. No doubt they will have notes of various shades of effusiveness put in their pigeonholes, including, "The greatest speech since Bevan, Lloyd George or Churchill." Delete where necessary.

Indeed, in the current climate, Conservative Members who make maiden speeches will definitely receive a flood of such notes. Given the track record of the hon. Member for North Essex, he probably sends notes before Members have made their speeches, so that they receive them on time.

We heard a good range of contributions and I took a slight hint from the hon. Gentleman regarding the future of the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Duncan), who made an excellent contribution about his constituency. He may be promoted to shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, a post for which he is almost uniquely qualified on the Tory Benches.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Ms Munn) referred to her predecessor, Bill Michie, who is well remembered by those of us in the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union group as the chairman. Inevitably, the combination of his name and the trade meant that he was known as Metal Michie. Another welcome addition to the AEEU ranks—my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann)—was head of research for the engineers when I was with the electricians. He drew attention to the unique qualities of his predecessor and provided many interesting details of his constituency. The hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Weir) drew us into the subject of the debate by mentioning rural transport, which was also welcome.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) also contributed to the debate. Although it is extremely good to have that constituency back in the Labour column, it is with a touch of sadness that we must acknowledge that our long-standing colleague, Cledwyn Hughes, did not live long enough to see that.

Then we had the retreats. The hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell) followed the great tradition of Sutton Coldfield MPs by denying that he has anything to do with Birmingham. He was equally in denial about the fact that a Conservative Government put them there in the first place when they tried to gerrymander the boundaries to win control of Birmingham and other cities in the metropolitan authorities. The hon. Member for Wealden (Mr. Hendry) rightly referred to his predecessor,

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith, who made a considerable contribution to the House, especially as a stalwart of defence debates.

The hon. Members for East Londonderry (Mr. Campbell) and for South Antrim (David Burnside) spoke strongly and passionately on the interests of their constituents. Although I was not present, my colleagues told me about the fine and well-judged maiden speech by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). She was the first woman to be elected from Northern Ireland in 30 years and will bring a rational and considered contribution to the problems of Northern Ireland and to our debates.

I do not have enough time to go into detail on the maiden speeches of the hon. Members for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) and for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) mentioned several capital investment programmes. My hon. Friend the Minister for Industry and Energy was uncertain whether that was a bid for Government funds or an announcement of how Shetland district council will be spending the great pot of money that it has in its own right.

Some hon. Members in this combined debate on the environment and rural affairs dealt with rural matters. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) talked at considerable length about foot and mouth problems. He made some valid points and my colleagues at the relevant Department will want to take them up. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) also made observations on foot and mouth.

The hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) mentioned footpaths and drew our attention to the success of her campaign on the basis of her local pledges, which highlighted the difference between that and the success—or otherwise—of the Conservatives' national pledges. Her colleagues are in her debt.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) gave the usual talk about the relevance of Westminster, which will be enormously improved when he and his colleagues turn up on a more regular basis.

There were limited speeches on transport. The hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) rightly drew attention to the considerable worries of commuters in his constituency, where I began my political career as a local councillor.

I was worried to hear about the difficulties that my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) encountered in arranging meetings with Railtrack. He and other hon. Members will know that in my previous incarnation as Defence Minister, I operated an open-door policy. Subject to the constraints imposed by the legalities of planning matters, I am more than keen to continue that arrangement, and I want relevant agencies and officials to do the same. I hope that he will provide me with details so that we can improve matters.

My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) mentioned school transport. We have invested money to draw up plans for schools, hospitals and industry so that we improve transport patterns. We look forward to working with hon. Members and local authorities to achieve that. My hon. Friend the Member for Eccles (Ian Stewart) rightly drew attention to safety on public transport and the need to protect people from anti-social behaviour so that they feel safe. No matter what the

authorities do to improve transport or how much money is invested, we need to have a deterrent in place so that people do not feel at risk when they use public transport.

Last but not least, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) rightly stressed that passengers must be at the centre of policy and come first. That has to be the focus of all travel authorities when they provide a service. They must bear in mind the expectations of the average person waiting for a train, bus, light railway or tram.

I come now to the broader transport issues. The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) will not want to hear this, but I want to remind him of our inheritance. It has been said many times, but it bears repeating, that many of the transport problems that we are experiencing today are the result of decades of under-investment and 18 Tory years of a boom-bust economy, and the impact of that on public investment.

We are now suffering from the results of an ill-thought-out, rushed privatisation of the railways, which split the industry into a hundred separate parts with no sense of direction or co-ordination. I understood that, to try to clear the ground, the hon. Gentleman had conceded that the privatisation had not been particularly well handled, but I notice that he did not take the opportunity to do so tonight. No one will trust the Opposition on the railways until they can see that, in order to put money into their coffers before the 1997 general election, they botched the privatisation, for which the industry and passengers are suffering.

We are also still living with a legacy of bus deregulation and privatisation, which again led to fragmentation and ignored the need for investment and partnership to provide quality public transport. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) demonstrated yet again that the Opposition have selective and convenient amnesia in that regard.

Miss McIntosh: Mindful of the fact that the Minister is new to his position, I congratulate him on his appointment. If privatisation was such a failure, why was a record number of passengers and freight carried on the railways after privatisation?

Mr. Spellar: That was under a Labour Government. My point is that the industry's fragmented nature contained the seeds of its problems. It would have been easier to have developed the industry had there been a better structure. That is not just the view of Labour Members; it is the view of most people in the industry. Even the hon. Member for North Essex has conceded as much previously. Conservative Members need to examine that. It does not mean that the whole structure must be turned over, but we need to consider how to develop that structure. We do not want another two years of turmoil and disruption. We need to work with the structure, but we could be doing a lot better had we not had that inheritance.

Mr. Jenkin: I think that we can put the debate on to a more positive footing. It is notable that the hon. Gentleman has not explained how he will put the matter on to a more positive footing. The Government have been in office for four years and he does not have a clue what to do.

Mr. Spellar: That is not right and I shall come to it later.

[Mr. Spellar]

Those sorts of problems cannot be turned around overnight, or in four years. That is why, in the previous Parliament, we set our sights on the longer term through our 10-year plan for transport. In this Parliament, we shall deliver on the ground.

In the past four years, as we heard earlier from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, we have begun to deliver change. The M60 Manchester orbital motorway has been completed; 17 new railway stations have been opened and more than 2,000 stations improved; 30,000 new buses have been registered; there have been new or extended light rail lines in Croydon, Manchester and London Docklands; we have had more than 1,800 new or enhanced rural bus services in England; and public transport use overall was up by 7 per cent. by 1997 and 2000. That shows the balanced approach of our programme.

During 2000, road traffic increased by only 0.4 per cent. on the previous year—a much lower rate than previous years and certainly lower than during previous years of comparable sustained industrial growth. That is only the beginning. We shall continue to deliver during the next five and 10 years. We are delivering solutions that will improve the lives of all sections of the community. By that I mean more and better public transport—trains, buses and light rail systems, with light rail having been proven to achieve modal shift from the car. We shall also deliver less congested and better maintained roads and better information for all road users—better not only for motorists, who are important, but for bus users, pedestrians, motorcyclists and cyclists.

Local highway authorities now have local cycling and walking strategies. We are working with them and the voluntary and commercial sectors to ensure that pedestrians can move around in far greater safety, to deal with problems of graffiti-ridden and somewhat smelly underpasses, and to make sure that pedestrians and cars are not in conflict. That will be good for vehicle users and for pedestrians. By creating the right conditions for walking, we encourage people to adopt a healthier life style. We must use available planning powers and encourage highway authorities to take advantage of them—[*Interruption.*] Many Conservative-controlled local councils are examining those issues, but we do not expect a similarly mature approach from some Tory Back Benchers.

An area that has been mentioned, but unfortunately not developed sufficiently, is rural transport, which is extremely important to the maintenance, preservation and regeneration of rural economies and societies. We are committed to sustained long-term investment to improve local transport in urban, suburban and rural areas. The 10-year plan for transport envisages a £59 billion investment in local transport of which £19.3 billion is public capital—a doubling in real terms of the figure for the previous decade. The local transport capital settlement announced in December provided an £8.4 billion package for the next five years. Every region in England will benefit from that investment in integrated and public transport schemes and in local roads.

Mr. Evans: Does the Minister recognise that in rural areas the car is a necessity, not a luxury? Will he guarantee that the next Budget will not clobber the motorist with higher taxation on fuel?

Mr. Spellar: What cheek—it was the Conservatives who introduced the automatic fuel duty escalator and the Labour Government who stopped it. In the last Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a package of measures that will benefit motorists in rural areas, including the reduction in duty on low-sulphur fuels, a freeze on vehicle excise duty until next year and an increase in the small car threshold for VED on cars. The latter measure should benefit those who live in rural areas who have a slightly larger car for travelling longer distances. We have done all that, so the hon. Member for Ribbles Valley (Mr. Evans) does not have to ask for such measures.

The White Paper "Our countryside: the future" published last November sets out our vision for rural areas and explains how we intend to promote, improve and extend public transport. We recognise that people living in rural areas are often less well served by public transport and can suffer disadvantage in accessing employment, services and shops. That is why we have targeted more resources to improve transport for all in rural areas. In addition to the boost in capital spending, we are investing £239 million over the next three years in rural transport services—an increase of 54 per cent. on 1998 to 2001.

Schemes that we introduced in 1998 to support rural bus services have proved a success. The bus subsidy grant has supported more than 1,800 new or improved routes in England carrying 16 million passenger journeys a year—[*Interruption.*] Some Conservative Members might not be interested, but their constituents certainly are. More than 150 innovative schemes, including demand-responsive and community bus projects, have been approved under the rural bus challenge. We are expanding those schemes still further. Our measures will increase and improve rural bus services and contribute to achieving the target in the 10-year plan of increasing the number of rural households within about a 10-minute walk of a bus service that is hourly or better.

That must be seen in the broader context of roads policy. We recognise that roads are a key element of the country's transport system and will continue to be so. More than 90 per cent. of passenger journeys are made by road and almost two thirds of freight traffic travels by road. That is why our 10-year plan provides for investment of £59 billion in roads.

That does not mean that we are embarking on a massive, environmentally damaging programme of new road building. We remain committed to the principles for protecting the environment set out in "A New Deal for Transport". In particular, there remains a strong presumption against new or expanded transport infrastructure that would adversely affect environmentally sensitive areas, such as sites of special scientific interest. However, we recognise that there will be cases where the overriding public interest will allow such development to proceed.

In fact, some 70 per cent. of planned spending on roads will be directed to maintaining and making better use of existing roads, which we know is of importance to drivers. That includes provision of £31 billion by 2004 for

maintenance of local roads to halt the deterioration in their condition and to eliminate the backlog of maintenance that has built up because of serious under-investment under the Conservative Government in the mid-1990s. Our investment will contribute to road safety and to ensuring that we meet our target to reduce by 40 per cent. the number of people killed or seriously injured. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson), will pay particular attention to that.

Miss McIntosh: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Spellar: We have taken the hon. Lady's point about the A1(M). *[Interruption.]*

We recognise the role that business, particularly the construction industry, will have in ensuring delivery of an integrated transport system. One of the big opportunities that the plan presents to the construction industry and other industries is the opportunity of jobs. With that comes the challenge of addressing—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. On both sides of the Chamber, there is far too much noise. The Minister is entitled to a hearing.

Mr. Spellar: With that comes the challenge of addressing the associated skills shortage and the ageing of the work force. The Government will work with industry, trade unions and others to ensure that the skilled work force required are available.

We shall be deeply concerned with the rail industry, too. Rail safety is at the heart of our policies on revitalising the railways. They are safe, but we must never be complacent. It is a matter of continual improvement. We have asked the Health and Safety Commission to ensure that the Cullen report recommendations are acted upon and to report to us in six months.

The complexities of railway operation mean that we should expect not a sudden transformation, but a steady improvement in punctuality. When the Secretary of State and I met the key players in the rail industry last week, we made it clear that we would work together to achieve a steady improvement in performance over the next few years. After safety, performance will be the top priority for Britain's railways.

We are committed to delivering the increases in passenger rail use, bus use and rail freight that were outlined in the 10-year plan, and to ensuring that transport makes its proper contribution to meeting Government targets on air quality and reducing greenhouse gases and carbon dioxide emissions.

By 2005, what will that mean? It will mean completion of 25 trunk road improvement schemes under the targeted programme of improvements, including the A1(M); 100 smaller schemes tackling congestion and safety problems; a traffic control centre giving up-to-date information about traffic conditions on the strategic network; the first phase of modernisation of the west coast main line, enabling trains to travel at 125 mph; new rolling stock for the inter-city west coast service; new light rail lines in Nottingham and Sunderland; and more than 80 projects supported under the urban bus challenge.

Our drive is to ensure that the system works—that the projects work. A lot of money has gone into transport. Under the 10-year plan, there is a lot more to come. We must ensure delivery steadily and relentlessly. At the election—it has been reiterated tonight—the public got it right. They knew that neither the Tories nor the Liberal Democrats had the ideas, commitment or realism to achieve that. We have, we can and we will.

Amendment proposed, at the end of the Question, to add:

"But humbly regret that the Gracious Speech makes no reference to agriculture and the countryside, contains no proposals to assist farming, tourism and the rest of the rural economy to recover from foot and mouth disease, does not include any commitment to establish an independent public inquiry into the origins and handling of the epidemic, and does not explain how the new Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, from whose title agriculture is regrettably excluded, will protect the countryside and the environment without changes in planning policy to prevent excessive development on greenfield sites, to the detriment of balanced development of the inner cities; regret that specific measures to improve transport are notable by their absence from the Gracious Speech; and have no confidence that the Government will achieve the world-class public services that they promised prior to the general election."

Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 33 (Calling of amendments at end of debate), That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 198, Noes 331.

Division No. 1]

[9.59 pm

AYES

Allan, Richard	Chope, Christopher
Amess, David	Clappison, James
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael	Collins, Tim
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James	Conway, Derek
Atkinson, Peter (Hexham)	Cormack, Sir Patrick
Bacon, Richard	Cotter, Brian
Baker, Norman	Cran, James
Baldry, Tony	Curry, Rt Hon David
Barker, Greg	Davey, Edward (Kingston)
Baron, John	Davies, Quentin (Grantham)
Barrett, John	Djanogly, Jonathan
Beggs, Roy	Donaldson, Jeffrey M
Beith, Rt Hon A J	Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Bellingham, Henry	Doughty, Sue
Bercow, John	Duncan, Alan
Beresford, Sir Paul	Duncan Smith, Iain
Blunt, Crispin	Duncan, Peter
Boswell, Tim	Evans, Nigel
Bottomley, Peter (Worthing W)	Fabricant, Michael
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia	Fallon, Michael
Brady, Graham	Field, Mark (Cities of London)
Brake, Tom	Flook, Adrian
Brazier, Julian	Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Breed, Colin	Foster, Don (Bath)
Browning, Mrs Angela	Fox, Dr Liam
Burnett, John	Francois, Mark
Burns, Simon	Gale, Roger
Burnside, David	Garnier, Edward
Burstow, Paul	George, Andrew (St Ives)
Burt, Alistair	Gibb, Nick
Butterfill, John	Gidley, Sandra
Cable, Dr Vincent	Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Calton, Patsy	Goodman, Paul
Cameron, David	Gray, James
Campbell, Gregory (E Londy)	Grayling, Chris
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies (NE Fife)	Green, Damian (Ashford)
Carmichael, Alistair	Green, Matthew (Ludlow)
Cash, William	Greenway, John
Chidgey, David	Grieve, Dominic
	Hague, Rt Hon William

Hammond, Philip
 Harris, Dr Evan (*Oxford W*)
 Hawkins, Nick
 Hayes, John
 Heald, Oliver
 Heath, David
 Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
 Hendry, Charles
 Hermon, Lady
 Hoban, Mark
 Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
 Holmes, Paul
 Horam, John
 Howard, Rt Hon Michael
 Howarth, Gerald (*Aldershot*)
 Hunter, Andrew
 Jack, Rt Hon Michael
 Jenkin, Bernard
 Johnson, Boris (*Henley*)
 Jones, Nigel (*Cheltenham*)
 Keetch, Paul
 Kirkbride, Miss Julie
 Kirkwood, Archy
 Knight, Rt Hon Greg (*E Yorkshire*)
 Lait, Mrs Jacqui
 Lamb, Norman
 Lansley, Andrew
 Laws, David
 Leigh, Edward
 Letwin, Oliver
 Lewis, Dr Julian (*New Forest E*)
 Liddell-Grainger, Ian
 Liddington, David
 Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
 Llywd, Eilyn
 Loughton, Tim
 McIntosh, Miss Anne
 MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
 McLoughlin, Patrick
 Malins, Humphrey
 Mates, Michael
 Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
 May, Mrs Theresa
 Mercer, Patrick
 Mitchell, Andrew (*Sutton Coldfield*)
 Moore, Michael
 Moss, Malcolm
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Norman, Archie
 Oaten, Mark
 O'Brien, Stephen (*Eddisbury*)
 Öpik, Lembit
 Osborne, George (*Tatton*)
 Ottaway, Richard
 Page, Richard
 Paice, James
 Paterson, Owen
 Pickles, Eric
 Prisk, Mark
 Pugh, Dr John
 Redwood, Rt Hon John

Reid, Alan (*Argyll & Bute*)
 Rendel, David
 Robathan, Andrew
 Robertson, Hugh (*Faversham*)
 Robertson, Laurence (*Tewkesbury*)
 Robinson, Iris (*Strangford*)
 Robinson, Peter (*Belfast E*)
 Roe, Mrs Marion
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Russell, Bob (*Colchester*)
 Sanders, Adrian
 Sayeed, Jonathan
 Selous, Andrew
 Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
 Shepherd, Richard
 Simmonds, Mark
 Simpson, Keith (*Mid-Norfolk*)
 Smith, Sir Robert (*W Ab'dns*)
 Smyth, Rev Martin (*Belfast S*)
 Soames, Nicholas
 Spelman, Mrs Caroline
 Spicer, Sir Michael
 Spink, Dr Robert
 Spring, Richard
 Steen, Anthony
 Streeter, Gary
 Stunell, Andrew
 Swayne, Desmond
 Swire, Hugo
 Symes, Robert
 Tapsell, Sir Peter
 Taylor, Ian (*Esher & Walton*)
 Taylor, John (*Solihull*)
 Taylor, Matthew (*Truro*)
 Taylor, Dr Richard (*Wyre F*)
 Taylor, Sir Teddy
 Thurso, John
 Tonge, Dr Jenny
 Tredinnick, David
 Trend, Michael
 Turner, Andrew (*Isle of Wight*)
 Tyler, Paul
 Tyrie, Andrew
 Viggers, Peter
 Walter, Robert
 Waterson, Nigel
 Watkinson, Angela
 Webb, Steve
 Whittingdale, John
 Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Roger (*Brecon*)
 Willis, Phil
 Winterton, Mrs Ann (*Congleton*)
 Winterton, Nicholas (*Macclesfield*)
 Yeo, Tim
 Young, Rt Hon Sir George
 Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mr. Peter Luff and
 Mr. John Randall.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
 Adams, Mrs Irene (*Paisley N*)
 Ainger, Nick
 Ainsworth, Bob (*Cov'try NE*)
 Allen, Graham
 Anderson, Rt Hon Donald
 (*Swansea E*)
 Anderson, Janet (*Rossendale*)
 Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
 Atherton, Ms Candy
 Atkins, Charlotte
 Austin, John

Bailey, Adrian
 Baird, Vera
 Banks, Tony
 Barnes, Harry
 Barron, Kevin
 Battle, John
 Bayley, Hugh
 Beard, Nigel
 Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
 Begg, Miss Anne
 Bell, Stuart
 Benn, Hilary

Bennett, Andrew
 Benton, Joe
 Berry, Roger
 Betts, Clive
 Blackman, Liz
 Blears, Ms Hazel
 Blizzard, Bob
 Blunkett, Rt Hon David
 Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
 Borrow, David
 Bradley, Rt Hon Keith (*Withington*)
 Bradley, Peter (*The Wrekin*)
 Bradshaw, Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brinton, Mrs Helen
 Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas
 (*Newcastle E & Wallsend*)
 Brown, Russell (*Dumfries*)
 Browne, Desmond
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burdon, Colin
 Burnham, Andy
 Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
 Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
 Campbell, Alan (*Tynemouth*)
 Campbell, Mrs Anne (*C'bridge*)
 Campbell, Ronnie (*Blyth V*)
 Caplin, Ivor
 Casale, Roger
 Caton, Martin
 Cawsey, Ian
 Challen, Colin
 Chaytor, David
 Clapham, Michael
 Clark, Dr Lynda
 (*Edinburgh Pentlands*)
 Clark, Paul (*Gillingham*)
 Clarke, Charles (*Norwich S*)
 Clarke, Rt Hon Tom (*Coatbridge*)
 Clarke, Tony (*Northampton S*)
 Clelland, David
 Clwyd, Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Colman, Tony
 Connarty, Michael
 Cooper, Yvette
 Corbyn, Jeremy
 Corston, Jean
 Cousins, Jim
 Cranston, Ross
 Crausby, David
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John (*Homchurch*)
 Cummings, John
 Cunningham, Jim (*Cov'try S*)
 Cunningham, Tony (*Workington*)
 Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
 Davey, Valerie (*Bristol W*)
 David, Wayne
 Davidson, Ian
 Davies, Rt Hon Denzil (*Llanelli*)
 Davies, Geraint (*Croydon C*)
 Dawson, Hilton
 Dean, Mrs Janet
 Denham, Rt Hon John
 Dhanda, Parmjit
 Dobbin, Jim
 Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
 Donohoe, Brian H
 Doran, Frank
 Dowd, Jim
 Drew, David
 Drown, Ms Julia
 Edwards, Huw
 Eilman, Mrs Louise

Ennis, Jeff
 Farrelly, Paul
 Field, Rt Hon Frank (*Birkenhead*)
 Fisher, Mark
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
 Foster, Rt Hon Derek
 Foster, Michael (*Worcester*)
 Francis, Dr Hywel
 Galloway, George
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Dr Ian
 Gilroy, Linda
 Godsall, Roger
 Goggins, Paul
 Griffiths, Jane (*Reading E*)
 Griffiths, Win (*Bridgend*)
 Grogan, John
 Hain, Peter
 Hall, Mike (*Weaver Vale*)
 Hall, Patrick (*Bedford*)
 Hamilton, David (*Midlothian*)
 Hamilton, Fabian (*Leeds NE*)
 Hanson, David
 Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
 Harris, Tom (*Glasgow Cathcart*)
 Havard, Dai
 Healey, John
 Henderson, Ivan (*Harwich*)
 Hendrick, Mark
 Hepburn, Stephen
 Heppell, John
 Hesford, Stephen
 Hewitt, Rt Hon Ms Patricia
 Hayes, David
 Hill, Keith
 Hinchcliffe, David
 Hodge, Margaret
 Hoey, Kate
 Hood, Jimmy
 Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
 Hope, Phil
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, Rt Hon Alan (*Newport E*)
 Howarth, George (*Knowsley N*)
 Howells, Dr Kim
 Hoyle, Lindsay
 Hughes, Beverley (*Stretford*)
 Hughes, Kevin (*Doncaster N*)
 Humble, Mrs Joan
 Hurst, Alan
 Hutton, John
 Iddon, Dr Brian
 Illsley, Eric
 Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
 Jackson, Glenda (*Hampstead*)
 Jackson, Helen (*Hillsborough*)
 Jamieson, David
 Jenkins, Brian
 Johnson, Alan (*Hull W & Hessle*)
 Johnson, Miss Melanie
 (*Welwyn Hatfield*)
 Jones, Helen (*Warrington N*)
 Jones, Jon Owen (*Cardiff C*)
 Jones, Kevan (*N Durham*)
 Jones, Lynne (*Selly Oak*)
 Jones, Martyn (*Clwyd S*)
 Jowell, Rt Hon Tessa
 Joyce, Eric
 Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
 Keeble, Ms Sally
 Keen, Alan (*Feltham & Heston*)
 Keen, Ann (*Brentford & Isleworth*)
 Kelly, Ruth
 Khabra, Piana S
 Kidney, David

Killoyle, Peter
 King, Andy (*Rugby & Kenilworth*)
 King, Ms Oona (*Bethnal Green*)
 Knight, Jim (*S Dorset*)
 Kumar, Dr Ashok
 Ladyman, Dr Stephen
 Lammy, David
 Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
 Laxton, Bob
 Lazarowicz, Mark
 Lepper, David
 Leslie, Christopher
 Levitt, Tom
 Lewis, Ivan (*Bury S*)
 Lewis, Terry (*Worsley*)
 Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
 Linton, Martin
 Love, Andrew
 Lucas, Ian
 Luke, Iain
 Lyons, John
 McAvoy, Thomas
 McCabe, Stephen
 McCartney, Rt Hon Ian
 MacDonald, Calum
 McFall, John
 McIsaac, Shona
 McKechn, Ann
 McKenna, Rosemary
 Mackinlay, Andrew
 Mactaggart, Fiona
 McWalker, Tony
 McWilliam, John
 Mahmood, Khalid
 Mahon, Mrs Alice
 Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Gordon (*Blackpool S*)
 Marshall, David (*Shettleston*)
 Marshall, Jim (*Leicester S*)
 Marshall-Andrews, Robert
 Martlew, Eric
 Merron, Gillian
 Michael, Rt Hon Alun

Miller, Andrew
 Mitchell, Austin (*Gt Grimsby*)
 Moonie, Dr Lewis
 Moran, Margaret
 Morgan, Julie
 Morley, Elliot
 Morris, Rt Hon Estelle
 Mountford, Kail
 Mudie, George
 Mullin, Chris
 Munn, Ms Meg
 Murphy, Jim (*Eastwood*)
 Murphy, Rt Hon Paul (*Tortois*)
 Naysmith, Dr Doug
 Norris, Dan
 O'Brien, Bill (*Normanton*)
 O'Brien, Mike (*N Warks*)
 Oiler, Bill
 O'Neill, Martin
 Organ, Diana
 Owen, Albert
 Palmer, Dr Nick
 Perham, Linda
 Picking, Anne
 Pickthall, Colin
 Pike, Peter
 Plaskitt, James
 Pond, Chris
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Sir Raymond
 Prentice, Ms Bridget (*Lewisham E*)
 Prentice, Gordon (*Pendle*)
 Prescott, Rt Hon John
 Primarolo, Dawn
 Purchase, Ken
 Purnell, James
 Quin, Rt Hon Joyce
 Quinn, Lawrie
 Rammell, Bill
 Rapson, Syd
 Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
 Reed, Andy (*Loughborough*)
 Robertson, John
 (*Glasgow Anniesland*)
 Robinson, Geoffrey (*Cov'try NW*)

Rooney, Terry
 Ross, Ernie
 Ruane, Chris
 Ruddock, Joan
 Russell, Ms Christine (*Chester*)
 Salter, Martin
 Sarwar, Mohammad
 Savidge, Malcolm
 Sawford, Phil
 Sedgemore, Brian
 Shaw, Jonathan
 Sheerman, Barry
 Sheridan, Jim
 Simon, Siôn
 Simpson, Alan (*Nottingham S*)
 Skinner, Dennis
 Smith, Rt Hon Andrew (*Oxford E*)
 Smith, Angela (*Basilton*)
 Smith, Rt Hon Chris (*Islington S*)
 Smith, Jacqui (*Redditch*)
 Smith, Llew (*Blaenau Gwent*)
 Soley, Clive
 Southworth, Helen
 Spellar, John
 Squire, Rachel
 Starkey, Dr Phyllis
 Steinberg, Gerry
 Stevenson, George
 Stewart, David (*Inverness E*)
 Stewart, Ian (*Eccles*)
 Stoate, Dr Howard
 Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Ms Gisela
 Sutcliffe, Gerry
 Tami, Mark
 Taylor, Rt Hon Ann (*Dewsbury*)

Thomas, Gareth (*Chwyd W*)
 Tipping, Paddy
 Todd, Mark
 Toughig, Don
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Dennis (*Wolverhampton SE*)
 Turner, Dr Desmond (*Kempton*)
 Turner, Neil (*Wigan*)
 Twigg, Derek (*Halton*)
 Twigg, Stephen (*Enfield*)
 Tynan, Bill
 Walley, Ms Joan
 Ward, Ms Claire
 Wareing, Robert N
 Watson, Tom
 Watts, David
 White, Brian
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Wicks, Malcolm
 Williams, Rt Hon Alan
 (*Swansea W*)
 Williams, Mrs Betty (*Conwy*)
 Wills, Michael
 Wilson, Brian
 Winnick, David
 Winterton, Ms Rosie (*Doncaster C*)
 Wood, Mike
 Woodward, Shaun
 Woolas, Phil
 Worthington, Tony
 Wright, Anthony D (*Gt Yarmouth*)
 Wright, David (*Telford*)
 Wright, Tony (*Cannock*)
 Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mrs. Anne McGuire and
 Mr. Ian Pearson.

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question again proposed.

It being after Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Speed Limits

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Angela Smith.]

10.16 pm

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead) *rose—*
[*Interruption.*]

Mr. Speaker: Order. An Adjournment debate has started. Could hon. Members please leave the Chamber quietly?

Mr. McWalter: I am grateful to the House—
[*Interruption.*]

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must have quiet in the Chamber.

Mr. McWalter: I am grateful to the House for providing me with an opportunity to broach the subject of speed limit policy and, with it, the philosophy of risk which our current speeding policies incorporate.

Most people agree that current speeding law is not in a good state. Speed limits are widely disregarded, and there is widespread sympathy for those caught infringing that law, which, according to an official Government document, is breached by almost all members of the British population at one time or another. One response to a law that is widely disregarded is authoritarianism, or the imposition of the will of the Government on those who are governed. However, we do not live in authoritarian times, and when a law is to be applied, it is a better and more durable solution for those to whom the law is to be applied to accept that it is a good law and worth honouring. The Kantian view of the law is that the people should embrace it as something that they themselves would have wanted to make.

Is there a way of persuading motorists to accept that there should be much stricter enforcement of speed limits? I believe that there is. My angle is to suggest that many roads need to be reclaimed by non-motoring users, although roads that are devoted explicitly to motorists could have a higher limit in relation to which there would be strict compliance. My theme is that information technology offers opportunities that previous generations did not have. I anticipate that such a policy, even if it did not lower average speed—as I believe it would, should or could—would result in speed being used more appropriately.

I am therefore approaching the debate from the perspective not only of safety but of motoring being an enjoyable although admittedly dangerous pastime. I feel that if we could break motorists' habit of disrespecting all limits, we could achieve greater compliance with limits which had as their object the reclamation of streets for playing children, when the limit could be as low as five miles per hour; of country lanes for cyclists and equestrians, when the limit could be perhaps 45 mph but with bespoke limits at hazards; and of roads through villages, with a speed limit of 20 mph.

My *quid pro quo* for that is something that will probably meet with alarm in some quarters: a much higher limit on motorways when conditions permit, and a higher limit again for those who are advanced drivers or riders.

I am asking for consideration to be given to strict compliance zones monitored by computerised cameras, and for those speed limit signs to be indicated by a double red ring. The disc with two red rings would show the motorist that he should not exceed that speed, that his movements are likely to be monitored and that infringement will generate a prosecution. Of course we already have the requirement to halt at some junctions but my approach generalises that idea.

At the moment, we are sleepwalking into an era of much greater monitoring of traffic, but without the radical rethinking that needs to be done. On the A414 dual carriageway in my constituency, for instance, hidden cameras are being installed by a road which even local pensioners regard as negotiable at more than 40 mph. If we ask motorists to obey limits that they do not understand and do not respect, and if we then multiply by a factor of 10 the number of prosecutions for speeding—as is beginning to happen in some areas—our administration of the law will be anything but Kantian in the sense of our having a law of which motorists themselves would approve. Laws that people do not respect are not embraced but resisted.

I want higher motorway limits under appropriate conditions and I want reclamation of country lanes and roads and residential areas for use by non-motorists. I expect that many computer models and statisticians will say that reclamation would of course lower fatalities on the roads but that those higher limits would raise them. I am not sure that there are any computer models that would assess how much safer it might be if we replaced a culture in which speed limits are ignored virtually universally with a culture in which 95 per cent. of motorists thought it right to comply with the limits because they perceived them to be intelligently worked out and a reasonable compromise between their desire to enjoy their motoring and their responsibility to those who use roads not for motoring.

What should that higher limit be? With modern vehicles and dry conditions, and where there is close monitoring of motorists' behaviour, I am suggesting that 100 mph would be an appropriate limit. Furthermore, I think that the Government should have as an aspiration a higher limit—say even 120 mph—but only for those who have passed an advanced motorists' or riders' test, and then only when the technology exists to ensure that the vehicle has been adapted to transmit messages to receptors that clear it for such speeds in the appropriate conditions. This builds in the idea that those who have demonstrated proficiency and thoughtfulness can be entrusted to use a larger range of speeds responsibly.

Of course, if such changes were introduced without any amendments to the existing system—as I believe was suggested in the Conservative manifesto—the results would be utterly unacceptable. Being tailgated at 70 mph is frightening and there is also very little enforcement of the general guideline that says that motorists ought to be able to stop in the distance that they see to be clear. The prospect of being tailgated at 100 mph rather than 70 mph is horrific, so if we have a new contract with the motorist, strict enforcement is essential. The penalties for behaviour such as tailgating must be harsh; in the worst cases, such behaviour is nothing short of attempted murder.

I think most drivers would welcome strict enforcement, which should ultimately take the form of an intelligent speed adaptation—speed limiters in the vehicle linked to

the global positioning system—in return for increased motoring freedom and for greater protection from death-engendering irresponsibility. I note that the Government are interested in intelligent speed adaptation, but that they have not come round to the view that an ISA vehicle can slow down if it approaches another vehicle at the wrong speed. That feature of ISA suggests that it makes possible safer faster speeds.

Once we have clear speed limitation—initially through digital cameras, but later through more sophisticated devices—we put ourselves in a position to reclaim the streets and the country lanes. Of course, I welcome the Government's home zones initiative, but it is just a three-year pilot which only began last year. Something more radical is needed to change motorists' attitudes.

The children who are denied the chance to play in rat-run streets in my constituency, such as Masons road in Adeyfield, which are primarily residential, and the horse riders and cyclists who would like to use in safety the cut between the villages of Nettleden and Great Gaddesden, would welcome a system in which it was recognised that roads are for all of us and not merely for motorists. I noticed in the Minister's speech in the previous debate that whenever the subject of roads was mentioned, it was entirely in terms of the benefits to motorists. I submit that we could get the motorist who has bought a sports car or a fast motor cycle to embrace such a policy and use speed only when it is appropriate.

The problem is that successive Governments have developed speed policies that have more to do with statistics than with psychology; they have more to do with a middle-aged emphasis on caution than with any carefully reasoned policy about producing a law that would be obeyed by at least 95 per cent. of the population. We have motorways with a 70 mph limit, to which, on a clear road at night, virtually no car conforms. The occasional exception might be the motorist like me—I was not sure at what stage we were going to end tonight—struggling back from Westminster at 2 am in a 1.2 litre Vauxhall Corsa. A speeding policy that is not respected generally—even if it is respected by people like me under those circumstances—brings the law into disrepute.

I believe that this has major consequences away from the motorways as well. On my journey here today, I travelled along a winding country lane where, in many places, there is not room for two cars to pass. Cars regularly travel along that road at 60 mph, with the potential for a head-on collision at 120 mph. Country lanes are dominated by cars, large vans and other dangerous vehicles, and those who wish to proceed at a gentler pace are subject to what one can only describe as a death-threatening attack.

Enforcement policy does not extend to country lanes, so the chances of being fined for speeding in a country lane is negligible. Indeed, the Government document says that the limit is complied with. I am not surprised—it is ludicrously high. Sometimes, when there is a fatal accident, the tracks show the speed of the vehicle that killed the horse rider, cyclist or pedestrian, but that is information which it might have been better to have earlier.

I note that the Government paper on this subject argued in favour of lowering speed limits in most circumstances, although it was remarkably blasé about the 30 mph urban limit, which I believe should be generally lower, and the

60 mph limit on rural roads, which, as I have indicated, should be a lot lower. A claim was made that some lower vehicle speeds could contribute to global warming targets—although not the lowering of 30 mph to 20 mph. That aim is obviously laudable, but I question its rationality.

Someone visiting her mum in a rural area 130 miles away might drive for an hour on a clear motorway at 70 mph and then along narrow country lanes at 60 mph. If we had a universal limit of 30 mph, that would make a major contribution to global warming. However, the five-hour journey that separated her from her mum would mean that she would visit her mum a great deal less frequently. That brings home the fact that our current social arrangements have presuppositions about speed and journey times built into them.

In my view, if that person is to visit her mum and get there in something like two hours, I would like her to do it more safely. She could do it by cutting her speed in the country lane by X miles per hour and increasing her speed on the motorway by X miles per hour. With 54 per cent. of road deaths occurring on rural roads and 4 per cent. on motorways, it is clear that there are many values of X which would make that journey safer. Of course, if a higher speed were used inappropriately, the balance of argument would not be nearly as strong. The Government paper said:

"speed policy involves difficult decisions on trade-offs".

However, the advantages of targeted increases in speed limits as a trade-off were given no consideration.

As a youth in the days before general speed limits I must confess to having been a rocker on a fast motor cycle—[*Interruption.*] Yes, I had hair as well. Doing that was dangerous, but it was also enjoyable—some people might say that it was enjoyable because it was dangerous.

The role of the state is to prevent people from doing things that endanger others who have not assented to be part of the dangerous pursuit. I want us radically to rethink our speed limit policy in that light. We need a policy that at least 95 per cent. of motorists think is reasonable. For instance, in my constituency, hidden cameras have been introduced on a dual carriageway, but when the limit seems to be too low that sort of measure receives little public support.

There is a consistent thread through what I have said, which echoes the Government's agenda. People have the right to use their motor vehicles for enjoyment and I am aware that that includes driving and riding fast. With rights come responsibilities, however, and we must have in place effective monitoring systems so that those who wish to avail themselves of such rights but do not wish to act responsibly can have the right withheld.

I have also said that roads do not belong to motorists. Some roads do; others are multi-functional. Increasingly, we should make it clear that on many roads the motorist is an interloper whose first law of behaviour should be to show consideration for others.

Our policies on speeding need radical revision. Our attitudes to roads and motorists need revision. Using modern technology and a new policy that emphasises the interplay between rights and responsibilities, we can aspire to reclaim the streets and yet we can get the motorist—passionately, perhaps—to help in that task.

10.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Mr. David Jamieson): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) on his success in securing this debate so early in this Parliament on a matter that is clearly of such importance to us. I also pay tribute to his record on the subject. I congratulate him too on being the first Member to draw me to the Dispatch Box in my new role—rent as I am from the Trappist silence of the Whips Office.

I also thank my hon. Friend for the way in which he has delivered this debate and raised the subject in such a measured manner. Clearly, he has a deep understanding of the subject—that may have been gleaned either from his days as a rocker on a motor cycle, or more possibly, from his three years in the 1960s as a lorry driver.

I do not want to oversimplify my hon. Friend's speech, but I think that he was trying to tell us that, as a pay-off for lower speed limits on certain roads, we might be able to consider higher limits on others. Often, in our youth we are guided by our hearts and sometimes we seek exhilaration. As a formidable academic and a thoughtful, philosophical man, he will know that, just as we need to be ruled by our hearts, we also need often to engage our brains. I will briefly describe the wider context of the Government's road safety policy and then I will try to answer, in a general way, the important questions that my hon. Friend raised.

The Government consider road safety to be a priority. It affects everyone and plays a fundamental role in our society—in health, environment and education. I very much subscribe to my hon. Friend's view that the roads belong not only to the motorists but to pedestrians, in particular, children and elderly pedestrians—the groups that are most often injured on our roads.

During the previous Parliament, we published a road safety strategy to underpin our goal for 2010 to reduce deaths and serious injuries by 40 per cent. overall and, in the case of children, by 50 per cent.

The strategy will also help to achieve the Government's overall target to cut accidents from all causes, and to improve our child road safety record. In addition, it will contribute to wider environmental objectives by cutting carbon dioxide and other emissions and reducing noise.

The strategy will help to build stronger communities, and it will form part of measures to regenerate urban areas and marginalised communities. It will reclaim for our children streets such as Masons road, which my hon. Friend mentioned in his speech. The strategy will also tackle road crime such as dangerous driving, and thus play a key role in the wider crime reduction agenda.

Given the subject of this debate, I shall now concentrate on speed and speed limits.

Vehicle speed is a serious issue which touches us all, whether we are travelling in a vehicle, living beside a road, or engaged in other activities such as walking or cycling. Speed limits are the focus of most people's attention. My Department issues guidance, but it is the local highway authority, which in most cases is the local authority, that is responsible for setting speed limits on roads. Those highway authorities have the power to set limits between 20 mph and 70 mph, depending on the nature and function of the road.

I note my hon. Friend's comments about the speed limits in his area. If he has not already done so, he may wish to contact Hertfordshire county council to discuss the matter further in the context of some of the roads that he mentioned earlier.

Speed limits are important, but there is a common misconception that road safety could be improved simply by changing limits. That was the thrust of much of my hon. Friend's speech. Too often, however, people call for lower limits when what they want is lower vehicle speeds. Sadly, lower limits alone have little effect on the speed of traffic. Indeed, in many cases it is not the speed limit that is the problem but the fact that motorists are driving faster than they should.

If unchecked, that can result in pressure at a local level to impose lower limits where they are not needed. The risk is that that could divert resources from initiatives that would be beneficial. Moreover, the imposition of lower limits could place an unrealistic burden on the police, and bring the system into disrepute with motorists.

Clearly, if we are to have an effective speed management policy we will need to ensure that the discussion is about achieving appropriate vehicle speeds rather than simply about what the signs beside the road say. It is also essential that speeding drivers begin to think about the road conditions and the risks that they pose, especially to pedestrians, when they drive in bad weather, near schools, or on high streets or other roads with many pedestrians.

In the countries that take road safety seriously, vehicle speed is considered the biggest problem. Research has indicated that excessive and inappropriate vehicle speed is a major contributory factor in about one third of all serious accidents. In human terms, that equated to 1,100 deaths and 12,600 serious injuries last year alone. There is also evidence that higher speeds on any given road are associated with more accidents and greater injury severity—a relationship that holds for all drivers, and not only for the less experienced ones.

If speed limits are raised, vehicle speeds tend to increase. Conversely, if no other work is undertaken, a lower speed limit tends to result in very little reduction in vehicle speeds. So, if we are serious about reducing deaths and injuries on our roads that result from speed, we need to adopt measures that complement—or even mitigate the need for—changes in the speed limit. That means education, engineering and, as a last resort, enforcement.

Last week, I had the pleasure of attending the Department's conference in Bristol to mark the launch of its road safety guide to good practice. I commend that publication to all local authorities, and anyone with an interest in the subject. It contains comprehensive guidance on dealing with the issue of speed management, to help local practitioners.

In urban areas, there is a high level of public acceptance of the 30 mph speed limit. Sadly, although most people think that the limit is right, they drive faster than that when they are in their cars. That leads to the conclusion that the 30 mph limit is generally correct, but that action is needed to ensure that vehicle speeds do not rise.

Speed management is the combination of engineering measures, such as road humps, traffic calming, road markings to change the nature and appearance of the road and, of course, enforcement—all of which are very effective. Where the most vulnerable, such as children,

are at risk, speed research has shown that 20 mph zones are excellent at reducing the likelihood and severity of accidents. These are areas where traffic calming measures are used to ensure that vehicle speeds are kept below that limit. Our policy is to encourage greater use of those zones.

Our home zones initiative will also be beneficial, as it aims to improve the quality of life in residential streets. In home zones, local authorities can design streets as places for people, not just for traffic—the road space is shared between drivers of motor vehicles and other road users. Home zones allow the wider needs of residents, including people who walk and cycle, and children, to be accommodated, especially the needs of those on Masons road in my hon. Friend's constituency. Although home zones are not road safety schemes per se, if properly designed, they can make a contribution to overall road safety objectives. The Prime Minister announced in April that a £30 million challenge fund for home zones in England would be created.

In rural areas the problem is different. Few people exceed the speed limit. As my hon. Friend said, the speed limits appear to be set unnaturally high. Generally, the road safety problem in rural areas is people misjudging overtaking manoeuvres and driving well within the speed limit, but at speeds which are too fast to negotiate the junctions and bends.

We have left the national speed limit unchanged, but our policy is to encourage local authorities to adopt a targeted approach to gain appropriate vehicle speeds on all rural roads, with lower speed limits where they are necessary. Work is well under way to deliver those initiatives. Only today, my officials met with representatives from the professional organisations and interest groups to discuss how best to make them a reality.

As my hon. Friend will know, evidence of such initiatives is already common in Hertfordshire, where his constituency is located. The local council is particularly active in speed management, having recently formed a new strategic road casualty reduction partnership, which includes the constabulary, the magistrates court, the Crown Prosecution Service, the health authorities and the Government office of the east. Their role is to review and update the council's speed management strategy to protect local villages and safeguard the most vulnerable through the safer routes to school project and the home zones.

Local transport plans provide the basis for allocating to local authorities the transport capital resources that they need to deliver their plans. Hertfordshire's allocation is

£22.5 million, and I am sure that that will ensure that the work can go ahead in the way that my hon. Friend would like.

My hon. Friend touched on the issue of motorways. They are our safest roads, because they are of a consistent and high standard. The vehicles travelling on them in different directions are segregated and the most vulnerable road users are prohibited. There are strong views on the motorway speed limit of 70 mph. It is not practical to enforce it everywhere, so there is pressure to raise it to 80 mph, or even as my hon. Friend said, to 100 mph or 120 mph, although I am not sure that that can be achieved in his 1.2 litre Vauxhall Corsa. However, many professional organisations, including the Association of Chief Police Officers, do not support that argument.

When considering what limit is appropriate, we obviously need to look at safety. However, there are other issues. My hon. Friend is a mathematician, and I am sure that he will have an O-level in physics or chemistry tucked away in his academic armoury. He will know that, as vehicles increase in speed, the amount of emissions that they put out per mile also increases substantially. So typically, emissions are at their lowest when a vehicle is travelling at around 50 mph, but increase sharply at higher speeds. Emissions rise on average by 30 to 35 per cent. between 70 mph and 80 mph. We also have to consider emissions of nitrous oxide. Tyre noise is yet another issue. It is a major concern for many people who live near roads and have to suffer the noise of transmission and that of tyres. Clearly, these issues are a factor in any decisions on speed limits.

This month, my Department published statistics showing the number of people killed and injured on our roads in the year 2000. I am glad to say that the downward trend is continuing. Nevertheless, the reality is that 3,409 people were killed and more than 300,000 people were injured—38,000 of them seriously—on our roads. As someone who is new to this policy area, I find it remarkable that some people consider that to be unavoidable. Behind those cold statistics are individuals, their families and friends, all of whom are directly affected. The public rightly demand high levels of safety in other modes of transport and I, for one, believe that we should strive for the same standards on our roads.

As I have explained, speed management is a key area if we are to make our roads safe. I am confident that the policies that we have adopted will deliver real benefits for all road users and I again thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at fourteen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 27 June 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr. SPEAKER in the Chair]

Member Sworn

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath:

Eleanor Laing, Epping Forest

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Small Business

1. **Mrs. Betty Williams** (Conwy): When he next plans to visit north Wales to discuss the impact of Government policy on small businesses with the business community. [520]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): Last November I met members of the north Wales economic forum who included representatives of business in north Wales.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State and I will continue regularly to visit north Wales and the rest of Wales to meet representatives of small business, which we recognise forms the bedrock of our Welsh economy.

Mrs. Williams: I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on his reappointment as Secretary of State for Wales. I was delighted when that announcement was made.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that G L Jones Playgrounds Ltd., in Bethesda in my constituency—a firm that he may remember visiting a few weeks ago—shows the way forward for Welsh manufacturing? It combines information technology with older Welsh manufacturing skills to produce playground equipment that is specially designed for the needs of children with disabilities and that can be marketed throughout the world. Will he join me in congratulating the university of Wales, Bangor on the way in which it has pioneered throughout Wales the teaching company scheme that successfully transfers research and knowledge to industry and commerce?

Mr. Murphy: Yes, I am happy to congratulate the university on its achievements, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on quadrupling her majority at the general election.

I agree with my hon. Friend that small businesses are extremely important to the Welsh economy. About 144,000 firms in Wales come into the small or medium category, and nearly 500,000 people in Wales are employed in them. It is important that we manage the change in our economy from what it used to be to what it is, and it is important that small businesses, including the firm to which she referred, play their part in that.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): The right hon. Gentleman knows that many small businesses in Wales are involved in tourism. What immediate, direct compensation packages has he urged his Cabinet colleagues to provide to those businesses?

Mr. Murphy: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the impact of foot and mouth disease on tourism in Wales, especially in Brecon this week. We face a tremendous problem, particularly as footpaths were reopened only a few days ago. He will know that the Government and the National Assembly are providing a joint package to help tourism businesses in Wales that includes application to the small firms loan guarantee scheme for loans up to £250,000, business advice through Business Connect Wales and deferment of tax, VAT and national insurance payments. The Assembly has provided a very generous package of assistance to enable local authorities to help businesses, including those in tourism. I know that he along with everyone in Wales, accepts that there are tremendous burdens on tourism businesses in Wales.

Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): The Secretary of State is aware that the French automotive company, Faurecia, has recently received regional selective assistance to set up in north Wales. Is he aware that only a couple of years ago, the same company, carrying out similar work, received such assistance to come to my community, and just a few months ago, sacked the work force without consultation? Its excuse was that it was leaving the United Kingdom because of problems with the euro and the exchange rate, and that it wanted to set up in Poland. Why should we continue to give assistance to companies that treat their work force with such disdain and lie through their teeth about their reason for moving away from an area?

Mr. Murphy: I share my hon. Friend's concern about what occurred in Tredegar. I know that the loss of jobs in his constituency is a tremendous blow, coming as it does after the loss of jobs at the Corus plant there. However, I assure him that any regional selective assistance grant that the company to which he referred received for moving to Tredegar will have to be repaid to the National Assembly. As he knows, the company has relocated to north Wales, where 240 jobs are at stake because of the proximity of the Vauxhall plant at Ellesmere Port. However, I share his concern about the way in which the move was carried out.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his reappointment, and the Under-Secretary of State for Wales and the hon. Member for West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire (Mr. Ainger) on their respective promotions.

The Secretary of State said that he has great sympathy for those people in the tourism industry whose businesses have been blighted by the foot and mouth outbreak. Is the support package that he described going to be adequate, given the circumstances in which those people find themselves?

Mr. Murphy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words of congratulation. I did not mention all the means of assistance that are available to firms in rural areas of Wales. For example, I did not mention that the National Assembly is undertaking a rates revaluation, or that it has held urgent talks with banks, building societies and mortgage lenders, at which it urged them to be flexible with rural businesses.

Lots of other measures are being taken, although the hon. Gentleman knows that there is a limit to what the Government can do for businesses in rural areas. However, the partnership between the Assembly, the Government and local authorities in Wales will go a long way towards alleviating what is obviously a terrible situation for people in those areas.

Mr. Evans: I asked that question because I feel that the support being given to industries in rural areas of Wales is inadequate and needs to be reconsidered. Is the Secretary of State aware of the Wales Tourist Board survey that found that three quarters of those who responded had suffered an average decrease in sales revenue of 60 per cent., and that advance bookings for the next six months are down by 67 per cent. on average? Will he hold another meeting with the First Secretary and representatives of the Welsh Development Agency to determine what tangible support can be extended to a blighted tourist industry?

The Secretary of State mentioned the recent tragic outbreak of foot and mouth in Brecon, but businesses need support now. I was in Ynys Môn a few weeks ago and I spoke to the owners of two businesses there that have been blighted by the disease, who told me that they need the money now. Will he give them some hope that it will be made available?

Mr. Murphy: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will meet the First Minister and Sir David Rowe-Beddoe, the chairman of the WDA, and that we will discuss some of the points that he raised. As far as Brecon is concerned, a meeting will be held today to deal with some of the matters to which the hon. Gentleman referred. Local authorities and agencies such as the WDA are co-operating to try to resolve the problems that have been identified.

The hon. Gentleman will know that the £12 million package that the Assembly made available for businesses in rural areas is very generous, and that it has gone a long way towards helping the businesses about which he spoke. However, I shall certainly bring the matters that he raised today to the attention of the First Minister.

Crime

2. **Mr. Win Griffiths** (Bridgend): What discussions he has had with the Home Secretary about measures to tackle crime in Wales. [521]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales meets the Home Secretary regularly to discuss a range of issues, including measures to tackle crime in Wales.

Mr. Griffiths: Is my hon. Friend aware that, although crime in the South Wales police area has fallen by some 25 per cent.—the second largest reduction in the whole of England and Wales—people in some areas remain worried about levels of crime? The communities that care programme that has just begun in my constituency has four projects under way that involve the police, local government, schools and the voluntary sector working together. The programme is jointly funded by the Home Office and the Welsh Assembly. Will he make further representations to the Home Office about bolstering the funding of those special projects in my constituency that are going so well at the moment?

Mr. Touhig: I congratulate the South Wales police on a record reduction in crime in their area. I am aware of the communities that care project to which my hon. Friend referred. It targets violence and crime, drug abuse, schools failure, pregnancy in schools and sexually transmitted diseases. The Bridgend project has received funding of £446,000, and I understand that the project organisers are now putting together their development plan. I welcome the initiative, and I would like something similar in my constituency. I wish it well and I am sure that it will be a success.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Does the Minister accept that the people of Wales and of the United Kingdom as a whole want more police on the beat? More police on the beat would be a way of tackling crime. When will the Government make the necessary funds available to put more policemen on the beat so that they are visible?

Mr. Touhig: The hon. Gentleman represents a party that has just lost a general election campaigning on a massive reduction in public expenditure. Police numbers in Wales have increased, additional money has been put in to combat crime in Wales and there has been a record number of policemen on the beat in Wales. That is the resource that the police service most needs. The Government have delivered that resource and will continue to do so.

Dee Estuary

3. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What discussions he has had with the First Secretary about Dee estuary conservation. [522]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I have regular discussions on environmental issues with the First Minister, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales will hold regular meetings with the Assembly Minister for Environment.

In the majority of cases, such decisions as they affect Wales are a matter for the National Assembly, in discussion with the lead Whitehall Department and the Environment Agency for England and Wales where appropriate.

Mr. Chapman: My right hon. Friend will be aware that my constituents take a keen interest in Dee conservation, on issues as varied as the management of the cockle beds and dredging at Mostyn. Is he content, given the many agencies involved, that the co-ordination arrangements are adequate and that sufficient dedicated funding is available to support them?

Mr. Murphy: Yes, I understand my hon. Friend's point. He knows that the Dee estuary strategy has been a success—some 90 organisations in total are part of it. I will bring his point to the attention of the First Minister. I am sure that he will be glad to hear that the Countryside Council for Wales and English Nature are consulting on designating the Dee estuary as a candidate area of conservation. All those things will undoubtedly bring hope and success to the area.

Job Losses

4. **Chris Grayling** (Epsom and Ewell): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about contingency plans for dealing with job losses in Wales. [523]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I regularly attend meetings with my ministerial colleagues, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Where large-scale job losses occur, the Government will take swift action to support people and communities through periods of change by investing in training and skills to help those made redundant, creating the conditions for new investment and minimising the disruption to the people involved and their communities. This we are already doing in the case of the job losses announced by Corus earlier this year, in partnership with the National Assembly for Wales.

Chris Grayling: Given that the Llanwern plant closed its doors for the final time this week, will the Secretary of State give us an update on the training package that has been provided for Corus workers? Will he also tell us whether his Department or the Welsh Assembly is taking responsibility for that training?

Mr. Murphy: I am of course aware that steel making ceases this week in Llanwern. It is a matter of great sadness to all Welsh Members, especially those of us with constituents who have been made redundant by Corus.

The Department for Education and Skills and the National Assembly for Wales have produced a package of measures to help with training. The National Assembly is spending some £7 million on training for people who have been made redundant by Corus. The Government are dealing, through the Employment Service, with job transition schemes and job clubs at all the plants affected.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): Will my right hon. Friend take up the case of the proposed job losses at the

Selectron plant in Cwmcam in the constituency of the Under-Secretary of State for Wales? Does he agree that the decision to axe 520 jobs and transfer most of them to Dublin is both capricious and perverse? Will he seek an urgent meeting with the management to persuade them to change their minds?

Mr. Murphy: I share my hon. Friend's concern about the position at Selectron and regret its decision to cut jobs there. As he knows, the Communication Workers Union has an alternative plan to keep those jobs in Cwmcam. I hope that the company will consider it seriously. I also urge the company to meet the public representatives of the people in south Wales who cover that plant, including the Under-Secretary.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): The Secretary of State will be familiar with Kings Triplex Holdings in Llanidloes, which is typical of a large employer in a small town. Tomorrow, KTH is expected to announce whether it will continue to trade in Llanidloes. Obviously, if it does not, that will have devastating implications for employment there. Will he commit, therefore, to working with the WDA and his opposite number from the Assembly, as well as with local people, to ensure that firms such as KTH get the support that they need to keep jobs in those areas? If the jobs do not remain, will he commit to working in partnership to ensure that they are quickly replaced?

Mr. Murphy: Yes, of course I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He and I met representatives from local authorities and the trade unions recently about KTH. I hope that tomorrow will bring good news for that part of mid-Wales. The impact of such job losses in his constituency would be as serious as that caused by the job losses in Corus in parts of south and north Wales.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): As has been mentioned, it is a great sadness that the last strip of steel was rolled at Llanwern yesterday. It is also of concern to the Secretary of State's friends in the trade union movement. Mr. Bill Morris of the Transport and General Workers Union in Cardiff yesterday said that unless the decline in manufacturing is reversed, the economy will become more and more dependent on financial and service industries, and that it is very short-sighted to drift into a position where no one is actually producing anything. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether he had discussions with Mr. Morris before he made those statements yesterday?

Mr. Murphy: I met the general secretary of the TGWU yesterday in Cardiff. Indeed, I spoke at the seminar to which the hon. Gentleman referred. While we regret the job losses at Corus and other companies in Wales, we also welcome the fact that comparing today with 1997, about 34,000 extra people are in work in Wales. The way in which we manage the change from our traditional industries to the new industries in Wales—the new high-tech companies—has to be tackled by the Assembly and the Government. I remind the hon. Gentleman yet again that, as well as the job losses, Ford has come to Bridgend with 640 jobs, Conduit has come to Cardiff with 500, Toyota to Deeside with 560, Hi Lex Cables to Baglan with 160, and there are many more.

Police Recruitment

5. Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): What recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary about the recruitment of police officers in Wales. [524]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales regularly meets the Home Secretary to discuss a range of issues including the recruitment of police officers in Wales. He also met the four Welsh chief constables earlier this year and there was broad agreement on recruitment policy.

Mr. Bryant: May I take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend—I think that I am the first person to do so today—on both his new post and, more important, his excellent result at the general election? Does he agree that one of the major problems that faces all valley communities in south Wales is drug-related crime? Will he join me in congratulating projects such as DARE—Drugs Awareness Resistance Education—in the Rhondda, which is pioneering because it uses police officers to provide primary school education that will provide an answer for the future in drug prevention?

Mr. Touhig: I thank my hon. Friend on two accounts—his congratulations on my appointment and on my re-election. He did not do too badly in the Rhondda either, pushing the nationalists well back. I am aware of the DARE project, which is an American anti-drugs initiative. It aims to offer educational programmes in the classroom to prevent and reduce drug use and violence among children and young people. The emphasis is on providing information, developing decision making, building self-esteem and offering healthy alternative life styles. I pay tribute to the South Wales police force, and in particular to the officers in the Rhondda who are participating in the scheme, and I wish it every success.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Does the Minister feel that league tables have helped the morale, recruitment and retention of teachers in Wales, and does he expect them to do the same for the police in Wales?

Mr. Touhig: It is important that we measure the performance of all public services. That is the only way to bring about any improvement. I have no doubt, as a former adviser to the Police Federation, that police morale in Wales is very good, because we are putting in record funding to recruit a record number of bobbies. The answer to many of our problems in the south Wales valleys and throughout Wales is to put more bobbies on the beat, and that is what we are doing.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): What discussions has my hon. Friend had with the Home Secretary about ending the practice of accommodating asylum seekers in the remand wing of Cardiff jail, which is causing a great deal of concern to voluntary groups, the Churches, the National Assembly and many MPs?

Mr. Speaker: Order. That supplementary question was wide of the question before us.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): When the Minister talks about putting more bobbies on the beat, what consideration has he given to the recruitment of more special constables in Wales? When I stay with the excellent Mrs. Meirwen Pughe at her guest house, Dolffanog Fach in Talylllyn, I am very conscious of the fact that there are not many police officers. The last Labour Government lost 6,000 police officers in Wales and in England. What is the Minister doing to encourage the recruitment of more specials?

Mr. Touhig: Since March 1997, an extra 271 police officers have been recruited in Wales and 6,863 officers are serving in Wales. In addition, there has been a record increase in funding for the police service in Wales. Nearly £390 million has gone into the settlement this year: £56 million extra for Dyfed-Powys, £75 million for Gwent, £82 million for North Wales and £176 million for South Wales. The use of that funding is, of course, at the disposal of the chief constable of each police authority, and I know of a number who are recruiting specials, but I particularly welcome the fact that more bobbies are on the beat, and we are providing the funding to make that possible.

Llanwrn Sports and Social Club

6. Alan Howarth (Newport, East): What information he has been given by Corus on plans for the future of Llanwrn sports and social club; and if he will make a statement. [525]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): I was disappointed to learn of Corus's decision to close the sports and social club at Llanwrn. I know that my right hon. Friend, supported by his local newspaper, the *South Wales Argus*, has led a vigorous campaign to keep it open, and I can tell the House that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has today written to Sir Brian Moffat, asking Corus to reconsider that decision in view of the devastation that the company has already caused the steelworking community surrounding Llanwrn.

Alan Howarth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for that. Clearly, they agree that the decision by Corus to close the club is a further body blow to the community of Newport. Is my hon. Friend aware, however, that the National Playing Fields Association Cymru has offered to take on the site and to assist local people to ensure the future of those vital recreational facilities? Will he confer with the First Minister to ensure that Corus does not get away with exploiting the site for development value? Will he use his good offices to broker a solution that is in the interests of the people of Newport?

Mr. Touhig: I can tell my right hon. Friend that the Department of Trade and Industry was informed only this week of the Corus decision, which was made with the breathtaking logic that we have come to expect from that company. It said that it proposed to close the club because it was becoming uneconomic. It was becoming uneconomic because of a lack of usage, and the lack of usage was because Corus was making steelworkers redundant at Llanwrn.

I will do all that I possibly can to aid my right hon. Friend in his efforts to keep the club and its wonderful sports facilities open, and I will certainly discuss the matter with the First Secretary in Cardiff and other Ministers.

Rail Services

10. Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions on rail services to Wales and the west country. [529]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Don Touhig): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly attends meetings with ministerial colleagues, including my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, where they discuss a wide range of issues, including rail services in Wales.

Mr. Heath: Given that Railtrack's forward plans have now been comprehensively demolished by the rail regulator, Mr. Winsor, will the Minister tell the House when we can expect to have a safe and efficient railway service to Wales and the west country, which our constituents deserve and passengers need to do their daily business?

Mr. Touhig: The hon. Gentleman is right. I support him in the points that he makes, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State did on 15 November last year, when he asked the same question. Obviously, the Government's first concern is to maintain the safety of the rail network, and we are doing so in discussions and by providing funding to support Railtrack. That is most urgent. We must also ensure that Railtrack carries out the work that is necessary to overcome the backlog of repairs, so that we make the railway system safe. As a regular user of the rail service, travelling between London and south Wales, I certainly want that to happen, and I shall do everything that I possibly can, together with my right hon. Friend, to ensure an improvement in the rail network, which this country certainly deserves.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [550] Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 27 June.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Salter: Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming Lord Cullen's recent report on the Paddington train crash, which claimed the lives of 31 people, including my constituent, Michael Hodder, in October 1999? Does he agree that Railtrack's failure to heed the

repeated warnings regarding problems with signal 109 demonstrates a lethal combination of complacency and incompetence? Furthermore, will he assure the House that whatever role is planned for the involvement of the private sector in helping us to improve our public services, we shall never again see a return to the botched and barmy privatisations that the Conservative party forced on the people of this country?

The Prime Minister: First, on the general point that my hon. Friend makes, he is absolutely right, and I agree with him wholeheartedly. The distinction is between working with the private sector better to deliver a public service that remains a public service and engaging in the type of breaking up and selling off of our public services that the Conservative party engaged in, with such disastrous effects for the consumers of those services.

Secondly, in relation to the Cullen report, yes, of course we welcome that report. The Health and Safety Commission is indeed already acting on the recommendations in the report and the Crown Prosecution Service and the Health and Safety Executive are considering whether to bring prosecutions respectively for manslaughter and under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974.

In respect of the railways, as my hon. Friend knows, we are now putting in a £60 billion investment and we are making the necessary changes; it will take time, but I think that he and every other hon. Member will know the importance of ensuring that that investment goes into our railways.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Does the Prime Minister envisage, as part of his radical health service reforms, the creation of specially built surgical units, managed and run by the private sector?

The Prime Minister: As we said in our manifesto, the management of those surgical units could be in the private sector, but those surgical units themselves and their staff will be in the public sector.

Mr. Hague: No wonder no one knows what the Government are really planning for the national health service. The Prime Minister says that there will be privately run surgical units—indeed, that is said in the Labour manifesto—but the Health Secretary says that under no circumstances will any clinical service be run by a private company. Clinical services are one of the things provided by a surgical unit. Being managed is the same thing as being run. The private sector is made up of private companies, so how are those two statements to be reconciled? Will any clinical service be run by a private company?

The Prime Minister: We are not privatising clinical services, but what we are saying is that if the private sector can help in the management of those surgical units, the staff, as I have just said, will be employed in the national health service, and the distinction is between ensuring that we run and deliver better NHS services and the privatisation of the health service, which is the Conservative party's proposal.

Mr. Hague: It does seem that the Government's position now is that the specially built surgical units can

be managed by the private sector, but clinical services cannot be run by the private sector, and the Prime Minister has not explained the contradiction. It is no wonder that he did not take Rory Bremner with him on his bus; he does different impressions of himself on a regular basis. If there is to be reform, is not it vital that it should be straightforward and honest? Is not there a danger in the Government lurching from beer and sandwiches with the unions to canapés with the contractors? Will he now accept that he has built up huge expectations in the country because of the radical nature of his promises, and that a failure to carry them through and deliver results would bring deep disenchantment in the country?

The Prime Minister: As ever, the jokes were good, but when the right hon. Gentleman got to the policy, it was a little less good. When we took office, we inherited an NHS in which the number of beds had been cut, the training places had been cut and not a single hospital had been built under the private finance programme. The Labour party in government, working with the private sector, now has under way the largest ever hospital building programme since the war—but within the national health service.

The distinction is between working with the private sector better to deliver the health service and the privatisation that the right hon. Gentleman favours. The other difference—perhaps he will tell us now whether he has learned anything from the election campaign—is between, over the next three years, the largest investment programme on which the NHS has ever embarked and £20 billion worth of cuts under the Conservative party. We stick by the policies that we put forward at the election; perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will tell us whether he does.

Q2. [551] Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Will the Prime Minister tell the House what the Government will be doing to make Britain the toughest place in the western world to be a drug dealer?

The Prime Minister: We shall be proposing two major measures as part of our legislative programme. I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done in Plymouth and elsewhere in tackling this problem. She will know that some 40 Customs and Excise staff are working on the problem in Plymouth. The first piece of legislation that we propose is to allow us to tighten the bail restrictions on people who are on drugs or dealing with drugs. The second is to allow us to confiscate better the assets of drug dealers. I am absolutely determined that we shall take every measure possible to make Britain the hardest and toughest place to be a drug dealer in the western world.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Returning to the Railtrack issue, when the Rail Regulator dismissed Railtrack's plans as "profoundly unsatisfactory", described Railtrack as "discredited" and went on to say that it was guilty of the

"hugely damaging practice of neglect of its assets and hostility to its customers and funders".

did the Prime Minister agree wholeheartedly with that analysis?

The Prime Minister: It is precisely for that reason that we have strengthened the powers of the Rail Regulator and that the Strategic Rail Authority was brought into being. There is no doubt that the way in which our railways are run is not satisfactory. We require the changes that we propose, plus the additional investment. Both of those things will be necessary to provide over time, under the transport plan that we have set out, the railway infrastructure that the fourth largest economy in the world demands.

Mr. Kennedy: That being the case, can the Prime Minister please give the House of Commons an absolute guarantee that he will not import such deficiencies into other public services under the plans that he has just described? It is perfectly obvious from looking at the faces of his own Back Benchers at this first Prime Minister's questions after the election victory that no one wants Railtrack issues imported into our wards and classrooms.

The Prime Minister: Neither will Railtrack's practices be imported into our classrooms, our hospitals or any part of our vital public services, but I will make sure that, for example, the hugely successful hospital building programme carries on. GP premises are also being built in co-operation with the private sector. I shall certainly ensure over the winter, where there are pressures and there is spare private sector capacity, that rather than leaving people in pain we are prepared to use the private sector. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to set the Liberal Democrats against any involvement of the private sector in the better delivery of public services, I am happy, but he will not be at the next election.

Q3. [552] Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Eden project in Cornwall, which has welcomed more than 1 million visitors since it opened during the heart of the foot and mouth crisis, and would he care to come to Cornwall later this year to be visitor No. 2 million?

The Prime Minister: I think it only right to congratulate my hon. Friend as well. Indeed, I believe that she is the third Labour Member who represents a seat that was targeted by the Conservatives to be triumphantly returned to the House of Commons.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Mine was a target seat.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has spent most of his parliamentary career as a target.

I congratulate the Eden project, which I visited before it opened. It is a magnificent project and 1 million visitors is an enormous achievement. That shows that we are gradually getting our tourism industry back to normal—partly as a result of the money that is now coming from the regional development agencies—in areas, such as my hon. Friend's, that have been affected by foot and mouth disease. We obviously have to do a great deal more, which we are doing. The Eden project is a marvellous tribute to the people of Cornwall.

Q4. [553] Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): During the election campaign, the Deputy Prime Minister talked

about introducing regional government in England, which he also mentioned in the previous campaign. Ministers in the other place referred to it in the past week, but the Queen's Speech was silent on it. I cannot find any support in my constituency for a regional government in Bristol, which is seen as remote and unnecessary. Will the Prime Minister confirm, now that the Conservatives have retaken control of Dorset, that he will introduce legislation in this Parliament to abolish Dorset county council to make way for his regional government—or has he abandoned that barmy, expensive and unwanted idea?

The Prime Minister: I shall try to disentangle some of those points. If people do not want devolution through regional government, they do not need to have it. That is the very principle on which our policies are based. As for the strength of support in Dorset, I gather that the hon. Gentleman was the Conservative party's spokesman on Wales in the previous Parliament, and it ended up without a seat in Wales. In the light of the results in Dorset and, in particular, of the fact that we now have a Labour Member of Parliament for that county, it would suit me—although perhaps not the hon. Gentleman's party—if he took control of looking after Conservative fortunes there.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): Will my right hon. Friend make it absolutely clear that riots and disturbances, such as those in Burnley, solve no problems? Will he join calls for calm in the town because last night's incident should not be allowed to spark new problems tonight? Will he also confirm that the House condemns all racist attacks by parties, such as the British National party, that capitalise on genuine issues? Finally, does he accept that the real problems with housing and the lack of finance in towns such as Burnley need to be addressed urgently for everyone who lives in those communities?

The Prime Minister: I agree with every word of that. First, I pay tribute to the way in which my hon. Friend handled himself in relation to events in Burnley. The situation has been difficult and he behaved responsibly and seriously. Secondly, I agree totally that there can be no excuse whatsoever for attacks on the police or, indeed, for acts of racist violence. Thirdly, I agree entirely about the hideous influence of organisations such as the British National party, which do nothing but try to stir up racial hatred in our communities.

The plain fact of the matter is that even in the most difficult circumstances in any community in this country, the vast majority of people are law-abiding and want to live alongside each other in peace and harmony. We have to ensure that the view of the vast majority, which I believe is shared by every Member of the House, prevails over that of the few who are engaged in stirring up racial violence, which is totally unacceptable in this day and age.

Q5. [554] Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Will the Prime Minister give a cast-iron guarantee that so long as he remains Prime Minister, there will be no expansion of nuclear power.

The Prime Minister: I do not think that an expansion of nuclear power is on the agenda, but reviewing our energy requirements for the future is. That is sensible, and

the performance and innovation unit report will do it. We must consider future energy requirements, but our policy on nuclear power has not changed.

Q6. [555] Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): In the election, the people of Croydon and Britain had a choice—[*Interruption.*] They made the right choice. It was between continuing investment and reform in the health service, which, in Croydon meant an extra 2,000 operations a year and waiting lists reduced by a third, and a party led either by someone who would cut health expenditure by billions or someone who sells fags to the Vietnamese. The people of Croydon picked Labour. Will my right hon. Friend renew his pledge on an agenda of investment and reform in the health service, locally and nationally, to provide an increasingly better service to the people of Croydon and Britain?

The Prime Minister: Yes, on all points. I congratulate my hon. Friend on retaining his seat. The investment and reform to the national health service will continue.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Since a Labour Government set up a full and independent inquiry into the foot and mouth outbreak of 1967, will the Prime Minister tell us what is different about the current epidemic that makes it less appropriate to hold such an inquiry now?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we should have an inquiry and ascertain the lessons that can be learned from foot and mouth. However, as the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons said the other day, it should be done at the conclusion of the outbreak, when we have eradicated the disease. We must also ensure that we learn lessons for the future.

Mr. Hague: Of course an inquiry should be held at the conclusion of the outbreak, but the Prime Minister told us that we were on the home straight a couple of months ago. Losses to farmers are running at £250 million a month. The epidemic is the worst on record. More than 4.5 million animals have been slaughtered; losses to tourism are estimated at £5 billion this year; large parts of the countryside remain closed; and many rural businesses face ruin.

Although an inquiry cannot start until the outbreak is over, a commitment to a full, public and independent inquiry could be made today. There is huge suspicion in the countryside about the way in which the epidemic began and its handling. Does the Prime Minister accept that a full, independent and public inquiry is the only way in which to allay suspicions and find the truth?

The Prime Minister: First, I have already said that there will be a proper inquiry. As I have made clear, its nature is a matter for decision later. Of course, there will be a proper inquiry into the lessons that can be learned.

Let me consider one or two of the right hon. Gentleman's points. He said that we suggested a few weeks ago that we were on the home straight. We are; the number of cases is way below that of a few weeks ago. I stress to him and the farming community that the disease continues to spread in specific areas for two main reasons. The first is farm to farm movements and the second is agricultural trade vehicles driving from farm to farm.

As we pointed out a few weeks ago, it is absolutely essential to continue all disinfection measures and for the farming community in particular to take them seriously; otherwise, there is a risk that the disease will carry on spreading.

The Government can take every possible measure to eradicate the disease. We are doing that on the basis of the best scientific and veterinary advice available to us. However, as we constantly advise, and as I state again today, it is harder to do that unless every single proper biosecurity precaution is taken.

Mr. Hague: We support the Government in taking every possible measure, but blaming others will not work unless Ministers are prepared for their actions to be fully investigated. Since the election, all responsible Ministers, except the Prime Minister, have been removed and are consequently no longer accountable to the House for their previous actions. They would not usually be called before Select Committees. Those Ministers need to be held to account for their handling of foot and mouth. We need to learn the lessons so that we can prevent another outbreak in future. May I suggest that, without a full and independent public inquiry, the confidence of the countryside will not be restored and vital lessons for the future may not be learned?

The Prime Minister: We do, of course, have to learn the lessons, and we will learn those lessons. However, from the outset there has been only one way to deal with this disease, and that has been to deal with the infected premises and neighbouring farms—because that is the advice that was given to us and we have followed it throughout. Slaughtering millions of animals has been a ghastly and difficult business, but if we want to eradicate the disease there is no alternative.

What is necessary now, however, is to do two things. First, we must ensure that we are indeed taking the proper measures of security and disinfection on farming premises; otherwise, the disease will carry on spreading. Therefore, it is important that we all emphasise to those in the farming community, the vast majority of whom behave responsibly and sensibly, that they must continue the measures.

Secondly, parts of the tourism industry have of course been very severely hit. That is particularly difficult given that, certainly according to the advice that I have, we do not know of a single case of a tourist, walker or rambler spreading the disease. It is important that we carry on taking whatever precautionary measures we can and give the support to the tourist industry that we are giving. That is why support running to hundreds of millions of pounds has been made available. We will carry on doing that.

Q7. [556] John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): Does my right hon. Friend agree that although much has been done for those needing care, there is much to do for the carers who look after them? I attended a carers' conference the other week in my constituency, where carers informed me of what they feel is required. I ask my right hon. Friend please to look at the plight of carers, and to ensure that they get the necessary reward that they deserve, and not the usual thank you.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. We are working in Scotland in

partnership with the Scottish Executive to try to improve services for carers and, in fact, have doubled the budget for carers for councils in Scotland. It is also important, however, that we give support in a variety of ways. Some of that can be financial, and some in giving breaks to carers. I agree with my hon. Friend, but he makes another financial demand. We shall have to make progress as we can, taking into account the other financial demands on us.

Q8. [557] Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Will the Prime Minister please advise the House which ethical criteria will be applied to companies seeking to sponsor schools? In reply, perhaps he would be good enough to tell the House which companies he foresees will wish to associate themselves with schools that are failing because of lack of investment.

The Prime Minister: Where a company can play a part in rescuing a state school, it is entirely sensible that we use it. Indeed, there are examples of where that has been done already and has worked extremely successfully. We should build on those examples. I am not picking out one company rather than another. The decision should depend on what delivers a better public service. I say to the hon. Gentleman, and through him, that we are not going to back down on the essential reform of public services. We are putting in the biggest amount of money that our schools and hospitals will ever see. That is going into our public services. They will remain as public services, but money alone is not enough.

We need changes and greater flexibility. For example, we need to break down some of the demarcation between professions in the health service; we need greater diversity in schools; and we need greater flexibility in how we employ staff. We need the money, we need the reform, and we will get both.

Q9. [558] Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, by awarding compensation to distant water trawlermen who lost their jobs at the end of the cod war, the Labour Government put right an injustice that the Tories steadfastly ignored for 18 years? However, is he aware that concern has been expressed by my residents about the length of time that it is taking to process those claims, bearing in mind the fact that some claimants are very elderly? What assurances can he today give me and the residents of Cleethorpes and neighbouring Grimsby that everything possible will be done to speed up the processing of those claims?

The Prime Minister: We are committed to dealing with the majority of claims by the end of July, and we are on course to honour that commitment. The scheme has already paid something like £18.4 million to almost 1,700 claimants. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the previous Government totally ignored the issue. It has been difficult, but we have made that commitment and we are paying out that money. In a small way, it is a significant difference in values between a Labour Government and the previous Conservative Government.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that, according to today's edition of *The Times*, his Health Secretary is signing an agreement with doctors to end the blame culture in the national health service. It may be a bit before the Prime

Minister's time, but he probably remembers that President Truman had a sign on his desk, saying "the buck stops here". Will the right hon. Gentleman assure me that, in the new culture of the NHS, the buck will stop and that a new culture of responsibility, whether for good or bad, will be introduced, which will apply both to him and his Ministers as well as doctors, administrators and nurses?

The Prime Minister: Of course we are responsible for the national health service and we are happy to take on that responsibility, but I repeat that it is only if we are prepared to make the investment in the national health service and the changes necessary that we will deliver the health service that we want. The hon. Lady shakes her head, but unless we manage to get the extra money going into the national health service that we are committed to putting in and that she and her party are committed to taking out—[*Interruption.*] Oh, I see—the Opposition are now all in favour of more investment in the health service. Let me remind Conservative Members that they fought an election campaign on £20 billion of cuts in the national health service, which is one reason—among many—why there are so few of them.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the case of my constituent, Mr. Dudakia, who disappeared in December while on pilgrimage in India? Obviously, this is a cause of great distress to his family, who have spent a great deal of time and money trying, unsuccessfully, to track him down. Will my right hon. Friend do everything he can to encourage the Indian authorities to continue the search for their father and grandfather?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has indicated to me that he is happy to talk to my hon. Friend about the case of her constituent. We shall certainly look into it and do whatever we can.

Q11. [560] Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): The Prime Minister will remember the tributes paid in the House to Bombardier Brad Tinnion who, aged 28, was the only British soldier to be killed in Sierra Leone. Charles Guthrie called him "a brilliant young man". Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that when Brad died, his long-term partner Anna Homsy was pregnant; that when their daughter Georgia was born, the Ministry of Defence obtained special Treasury compensation to pay Georgia a pension of £2,000 a year until she is 17; but that the MOD has not asked the Treasury for a similar dispensation to give Anna, too, a pension, despite the fact that she was the sole beneficiary of Brad's will and he had lived with her for 10 years? Brad gave his life for his country. Surely the Government should make sure that the people he cared for most are looked after.

The Prime Minister: Brad Tinnion was indeed an exceptionally brave young man—indeed, all those who took part in that operation in Sierra Leone put their lives at risk. It was an immensely dangerous operation and they fulfilled it with extraordinary bravery and courage. I simply do not know the circumstances to which the hon. Gentleman has alluded, but I shall certainly look into them and get back to him.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): May I take the Prime Minister back to early May? Did he notice at that busy

time that Herman Ouseley was on the board that appointed Lord Stevenson of hairdresser to select the people's peers? Did he notice also that, by an amazing coincidence, of 3,000 applications, Herman Ouseley's came out top? That, by any stretch of the imagination, would be considered irregular in both public and private sectors. If people's peers were my right hon. Friend's idea, it was not his best one—it was certainly never specifically voted for by the House of Commons. Will he ensure, first, that the name does not go forward to Buckingham palace because of the irregularity; and, secondly, will he rethink the nonsense of people's peers and press ahead with making the second Chamber of Parliament democratic?

Hon. Members: Give him a job.

The Prime Minister: It might have been better if I

First, I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Secondly, I have to say that I think that he is a bit unfair about Herman Ouseley, who gave very good public service to this country for many years. My hon. Friend forgets that the independent Appointments Commission has taken away prime ministerial patronage, not consolidated it at all—which is more than the Conservative party did in 18 years in government.

Finally, I have to disagree with my hon. Friend on the last part of his question, and I urge right hon. and hon. Members to think about it carefully. I do not believe that it would be sensible for the Commons to legislate so that the House of Lords became, in effect, a rival Chamber to this House. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why not?"] Because it would produce the sort of gridlock that we do not want. The Lords is a revising Chamber and it should, in my view, have a different type of membership from this Chamber. I happen to support the proposals of the Wakeham commission, but I do not doubt that we shall have a healthy debate about them in future.

Q12. [561] Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On 8 June, only one day after the general election, South Staffordshire health authority announced the closures of the Victoria hospital in Lichfield and the Hammerwich hospital in Burntwood, in an attempt to save £1 million a year.

The Prime Minister may not be aware—there is no reason why he should be—that South Staffordshire health authority has a shortfall each year of £4.75 million from its target funding. If I send the documentation to the right hon. Gentleman, will he undertake personally to look into this issue, which is of such great concern to my constituents?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly look into the matter if the hon. Gentleman sends me the information. I do not know about the circumstances that he has outlined. Whatever potential shortfall there may be from the health authority's target, it will have received a great additional sum of money as a result of the extra investment that we put in. Without getting too much of a sense of déjà vu about Prime Minister's questions before the election, the fact is that he and every other member of the Conservative party stood on a platform of cuts in investment in our

public services. *[Interruption.]* They may now suffer from collective amnesia, but they stood for opposition to the public spending increases that we put forward.

I remember that when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer first announced that public service investment, Conservatives described it as reckless

and irresponsible. I do not think that they meant that as a compliment. Whatever the hon. Gentleman says, it is important to realise the differences between the parties. Not one of the candidates in the leadership election has done other than accept the economic policy upon which he stood at the election. That economic policy would lead to boom and bust and cuts in services. We would not do it and Conservatives would.

BILL PRESENTED**ELECTORAL FRAUD (NORTHERN IRELAND)**

Mr. Speaker: I understand that the Bill is not to be presented today.

WELSH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee (matters relating exclusively to Wales)),

That—

1. The matter of the Government's legislative programme, as outlined in the Queen's Speech as it relates to Wales, be referred to the Welsh Grand Committee for its consideration;

2. The Committee shall meet on Tuesday 3rd July at half past ten o'clock and between four o'clock and six o'clock at Westminster to take questions under Standing Order No. 103 (Welsh Grand Committee (questions for oral answer)) and to consider the matter of the Government's legislative programme as outlined in the Queen's Speech as it relates to Wales, under Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee (matters relating exclusively to Wales))—
[Mr. Ainger.]

Question agreed to.

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 12 (House not to sit on certain Fridays),

That the House shall not sit on the following Fridays:

29th June, 6th July, 7th and 14th December 2001, and 15th February, 22nd March, 3rd and 17th May, 14th and 28th June 2002.—[Mr. Ainger.]

Question agreed to.

Points of Order

3.32 pm

David Winnick (Walsall, North): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am rather concerned about repeated newspaper reports, including one today, that the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards is not to be reappointed. I wonder whether we are being softened up for her contract not being renewed.

You will know, Mr. Speaker, how all of us were tarred in previous Parliaments by allegations of sleaze and why the Committee on Standards in Public Life was appointed, and later the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. The criticism made about this public official and servant of the House seems to be that she has been over-zealous. I put it to you that she is carrying out her duties in a responsible manner and that, if her contract were not renewed, it would, in my view at least, send out all the wrong signals. I wonder whether you would take that on board.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made his views known. It is not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. If I may say so, we heard a party political broadcast. I would urge you and the House to take no notice of it.

Mr. Speaker: That was not a point of order.

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[SIXTH DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [20 June].

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:
Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament—
[*Mr. Sheerman.*]

Question again proposed.

Home Affairs and Constitution

Mr. Speaker: I have selected for debate the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. In addition, under Standing Order No. 33, I have selected for a separate Division the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Liberal Democrats. After the first Division, I shall call a Member on the Liberal Democrats to move the amendment formally.

The House will know, because of the 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, that many Members wish to speak. It would be offensive if hon. Members approached the Chair during the opening speeches. I would not appreciate such an approach. Anyone wishing take part in the debate should listen to the opening speeches.

3.35 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Address, at the end of the Question to add:

'But humbly regret that the Gracious Speech does not contain the Bills on victims' rights and reform of the licensing laws promised in the Government's manifesto, nor any measures to make prisons more purposeful, to improve the asylum system to ensure that the United Kingdom fulfils its obligations to genuine refugees, and to introduce honesty in sentencing; note that the Gracious Speech makes no mention of the cuts in police numbers that have occurred since 1997 and the crisis in police morale; further regret that the Government has failed to outline detailed proposals to alter the procedures or composition of either House of Parliament, and failed to guarantee suitable opportunities for the participation of all political parties in any consideration about the future of Parliament; further note that the Gracious Speech contains no plans to increase the democratic accountability of Her Majesty's Government and its servants, and makes no reference to the need to address the problems caused by the increased diminution of the authority of this place since 1997 and of the falling participation rates in national elections; and further regret that the Government intends to introduce ratification of the Nice Treaty without allowing the people an opportunity to express their views in a referendum.'

First, I should like to congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, on your re-election as the right hon. Member for Glasgow, Springburn and on your re-election as Speaker of the House. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, who opened the debate of the Queen's Speech for Conservative Members last week. On that occasion, he treated the House to one of the best speeches that Members have heard in recent years. It was all the more remarkable given the high quality of the contribution of the previous speaker, the hon. Member for

Tottenham (Mr. Lammy), who seconded the Loyal Address. Even the Prime Minister said that my right hon. Friend's speech

"was extraordinarily witty and eloquent, which is what we expect of him."—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2001; Vol. 370, c. 49.]

It is just not for my right hon. Friend's acknowledged debating skill that his leadership will be remembered. He will for ever be known as courageous in the face of adversity; his was a cool nerve and his purpose was steadfast.

I should like to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) for his work as Home Secretary over the past four years. He was a diligent and hard-working Home Secretary and, in my dealings with him, I always found him to be most courteous to the Opposition. I wish him well in his new responsibilities at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and I hope that he will not find the domestic arrangements at 1, Carlton gardens too cramped.

Finally, before I get down to the business before the House today, I should like to congratulate the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) on his appointment as Home Secretary—although the fact that he got the job came as little surprise to those of us who read *The Sun*. I wish him and his ministerial team well in the tenure of their new posts, but I remind them that the past few days, during which there have been several important Home Office issues on the front page of just about every newspaper in the country, are the norm, rather than the exception. In that context, I condemn the recent violence in Oldham, Burnley and elsewhere, and echo the calls on all sides for restraint and dialogue.

As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said last week, we can welcome certain elements of the Gracious Speech, although even some of them are not without danger. The Government have said that they intend to build on Conservative legislation—although they did not quite use those words—on the seizure of criminals' assets. We need to remember that, under English law, there is a crucial difference between those who have been convicted of a criminal offence and those who have not yet been convicted. While we support the seizure of assets from those found guilty by a court, I myself resist the confiscation of assets prior to conviction.

Similarly, there is widespread concern, not just among Opposition Members, about the Government's plans both to reveal routinely to juries defendants' previous convictions and to curtail the right to jury trial itself, which we vigorously and, indeed, successfully opposed in the previous Parliament. In developing their proposals for the reform of the justice system, I hope that the Government will be mindful of the need to ensure both justness and fairness. The fight against crime should be just that—the fight against crime—and not an excuse for a general deprivation of civil liberties.

In the Gracious Speech, despite all their election rhetoric, the Government failed either to introduce legislation to improve victims' rights or, indeed, to reform the licensing laws, both of which were promised. The Labour manifesto promised to

"legislate for a Victims' Bill of Rights to give support, protection, and rights to information and compensation to victims."

There was no mention of that in the Gracious Speech, but that is hardly surprising, as the Prime Minister has been promising such a measure since 1994, at least. The victims of crime, it appears, will just have to wait.

The manifesto also promised

"an overhaul of licensing laws, greater flexibility over opening times, and tougher controls on rogue landlords".

Indeed, the Labour party made quite a big issue of this at the election, sending text messages to young voters telling them,

"CLDNT GVE A XXXX 4 LST ORDRS? VTE LBR ON THRSDAY 4 XTRA TIME"

Extra time for what? Was it extra time for Labour to spend breaking its promises?

The week before the election, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), who was then a Minister and to whom I have given notice of my intention to raise this matter, made the following announcement, which we understand had the Prime Minister's full backing:

"Our licensing laws are outdated, complex and in need of a radical overhaul . . . We are determined to bring forward these reforms as quickly as possible."

Now, however, the hon. Gentleman has realised the truth and has accused the Prime Minister of "bad political judgment" and of breaking his promises to the British people. Last year, we were told that reforms would be in place by this summer. It now looks as if it will be 2004 at the earliest.

I also hope that the Government will ensure that measures to tackle paedophiles who entice children over the internet through chatrooms will be included in the criminal justice Bill.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett) indicated assent.

Miss Widdecombe: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that. The Opposition first proposed those measures more than a year ago and, inexplicably, the Government voted against them on a number of occasions during the last Parliament. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will depart from the approach of his predecessor in that respect and, because he has indicated his assent, I look forward with eager anticipation to what he has to say on the subject.

The Gracious Speech also proposes a police Bill. During the last Parliament, police numbers and police morale plummeted to their lowest levels ever. Despite the repeated promises by the Prime Minister and the right hon. Member for Blackburn, there were many fewer officers at the time of the last election than when the Government came to power in 1997, and police numbers are still below the levels that the Government inherited. The Government must look to improve not just the recruitment rate, which was allowed to fall to dangerously low levels during the last Parliament, but also the retention of serving officers. The strength and status of the job and the attraction of serving as a police officer must be enhanced.

All too often in the past, however, the Labour Government have been all spin and no delivery and have failed to live up to their promises. So if the right hon. Gentleman's proposals mean more targets, more paperwork for the police, more upheaval and measures that stop the police getting on with their job, the Government will have learned absolutely nothing.

The chairman of the West Yorkshire Police Federation said in March,

"The blame lies fairly and squarely with Jack Straw . . . It's a total mess. There are fewer and fewer officers having to cope with more and more work."

We all know what the record of the new Home Secretary was in his previous job: a directive a day from Whitehall for the teachers.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): The right hon. Lady may have seen the editorial of June's edition of the Metropolitan Police Federation magazine. It says:

"Police conditions of service suffered the biggest blow in 1992, when a . . . Home Secretary called Kenneth Clarke arranged the Sheehy Committee . . . The resultant reduction in the compensation for doing the job ensured recruiting just dropped away."

To assist new Members, will she tell us what she thought of the decision by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) to set up the Sheehy committee?

Miss Widdecombe: For all that the hon. Gentleman says about recruiting falling off, we left behind 16,000 more police officers than we inherited from Labour. That is a fact of life, just as it is a fact that there are now fewer police officers than the Labour Government inherited from us.

I see from the written answer given on Monday to my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) by the Minister for Police, Courts and Drugs that plans for the Home Secretary's much-trailed police standards unit

"are being worked up as a priority."—[Official Report, 25 June 2001; Vol. 370, c. 48W.]

With the Home Secretary's record in mind, we shall look with interest at the form that that unit takes.

Measures on sentencing were also announced in the Gracious Speech, although I fear that the Government will not introduce greater honesty into the system. Indeed, according to the memo leaked in February from the previous Home Secretary's special adviser, what will be introduced will be

"a significant softening of sentencing arrangements".

The Government have already made it clear that they intend to retain the special early-release scheme established by the right hon. Member for Blackburn, which at present rates would see another 80,000 criminals released earlier than normal by the end of the Parliament, including 10,000 drug dealers, 10,000 robbers and burglars and 10,000 violent criminals. In answers given on Monday, the Minister for Prisons and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Beverley Hughes), also made it clear that the Government will not allow victims to be told about that either when prisoners are released or at the time of sentencing. I call on the Home Secretary to reconsider both of those decisions.

The beginning of any Parliament is a good time to step back, reconsider and examine the overall objectives of policy. I believe that one of the Government's major objectives in this Parliament should be to improve the lives of the group of people whom, and I admit it, successive Governments have let down and who are still ignored by many politicians from all parties even today. I have called them the forgotten decent. They are people like any hon. Member but with only a fraction of our

[Miss Widdecombe]

resources. All they want to do is to live normally. Instead, their lives are made a daily hell by drugs, thuggery, intimidation and the sheer degradation of the environment around them.

There was some coverage in the media of my recent visit to the Arden estate in Hackney, where I observed yet again how many decent people in this country are, even today, forced to live in conditions that are entirely unacceptable. If we really want to have an inclusive society—a much-overused phrase—we have to revolutionise places such as that, where mothers cannot let their children go out to play without checking for needles first, where gardens are wrecked and windows of people's homes are broken and where the vulnerable are intimidated and every agency shrugs its shoulders. Police leave it to the councils; the councils leave it to police. The courts cannot or will not take effective action, and the pattern continues from one generation to the next.

Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Does the right hon. Lady not think it a bit rich to be lecturing Labour Members on those matters when we are the ones who have put an extra 1.1 million people back into jobs? We are spending more than the previous Conservative Government did on housing, and we are lifting people out of poverty, which is the root cause of crime. We have also been investing more in police, whereas Conservative Members were committed to slashing public investment.

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman demonstrates what has gone wrong with the debate on this subject and why so many people just do not come out to vote. Rather than having their problems dealt with and their quality-of-life issues addressed, they are treated only to a trading of statistics by politicians. In the discussion of this particular issue I have avoided doing that. I have not talked about the single regeneration budget or all the issues that I could have talked about; I said that those people have been let down by successive Governments and I meant that.

I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he approach the subject seriously and consider that none of the factors that he has mentioned, however worthy they might be in their own right, have dealt with the problem of those people experiencing that menace as a daily, living reality. For them, the menace is not the odd headline in a tabloid but a daily, living reality.

Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I shall make some progress with my speech.

Five months ago in the House, I challenged the Home Secretary's predecessor on the plight of an elderly resident on one such estate. That man was being terrorised in his own home by gangs of youths. He actually had to put—it would be farcical if it were not so tragic—the local police station number on to his friends and family discount scheme because he was making daily calls for help. He said:

"I am frightened to death. It's unbearable . . . I can't live like this. The police, as individuals, are very good, but we need more of them on the streets, patrolling the estate."

Is it people like that who are the victims of Government failure. The challenge of the next few years is to ensure that their concerns are heard and dealt with.

Mr. Hughes: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I am going to finish this passage. Moreover, having given way before, I was not entirely enlightened by the comments that were made.

Dealing with those concerns is the challenge, and it is a challenge that I shall continue to take up as long as I am in this place.

It is not politically correct to talk about zero tolerance, about taking problem children off the streets and into secure training or about evicting troublemakers entirely. But unless a Home Secretary gets to grips with those problems—with, if I may put it this way, a Guiliani-style will—then not only will decent people continue to suffer, but we shall continue to produce generation after generation of disaffected youngsters who have seen no better, have been taught no better and know no better. It is not just the victims who have been let down, but the miscreants themselves. Recent events have brought home to all of us the necessity for ensuring that youngsters do know better. The murder of Damilola Taylor late last year was an appalling crime, but as charges have now been brought and the case is sub judice, I shall not comment further.

However, there is one such case that is no longer before the courts and has dominated public debate in recent days, namely, the release on parole of Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, the killers of little James Bulger. I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing the deepest sympathy to Denise Fergus, Ralph Bulger and the rest of James's family at what must be another incredibly difficult time for them.

The House knows that I fully support the position taken by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), namely, that Thompson and Venables should have served at least 15 years, rather than eight. I do not find it readily comprehensible that the Lord Chief Justice should have taken the decision to cut the tariff in the way he did.

However, I believe that there are now a number of important issues that arise from the handling of the case, issues to which I hope the Home Secretary will respond either in his remarks today or at some stage in the near future. First, there is the question of Thompson and Venables's anonymity. It can be in nobody's interest for some kind of vigilante society to be created as a result of that case. We must all hope that the media will exercise restraint, even if it is true that Thompson and Venables probably did not help themselves by ensuring that their cases were kept in the public eye through a succession of appeals. It might have been better to do as Mary Bell did: put their heads down, get on with the sentence and give the public time to forget.

I hope that the Home Secretary will look closely at the comments last October by the Lord Chief Justice about whether or not it would have been a good idea to send Thompson and Venables to a young offenders institution. I have to say that his concerns on that score evoke some sympathy in me. However, I believe that if it was not right to send them to a YOI, we should not have been faced with a stark choice between that and freedom before an

appropriate time, and that other arrangements could, and almost certainly should, have been made for their secure detention.

We would all hope that we do not get a repeat of this sort of case in the future, but it may happen. I hope that the course of action taken by the Lord Chief Justice will not become a dangerous precedent in that respect and that the Home Secretary will give some thought—I do not ask for an instant solution—as to whether we can avoid a choice between adult imprisonment and inappropriate early release.

Finally, there is the wider question of tariff setting for juvenile killers. As a result of the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights, these matters are now wholly in the hands of the judiciary. However, I hope that the Home Secretary will comment—and, I hope, reassure us in his speech—about the reports that have appeared in the press that dozens of killers, including the killer of the headmaster Philip Lawrence, may soon also have their tariffs cut by the Lord Chief Justice and be released inappropriately early. While the recent judgment on the European Court stands, as do the adjustments made to our domestic legislation, I urge the Home Secretary at least to look at the arrangements that are now in place and see if they can somehow be improved.

The Gracious Speech completely failed to mention prisons. The previous Home Secretary ignored the issue of prison conditions, and the previous Minister responsible for prisons appeared uninterested. I hope that the Home Secretary will reverse that trend and will make conditions in our prisons a priority.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Hear, hear.

Miss Widdecombe: I am so grateful.

This might not be the most fashionable of political subjects, but it is clear that whether time in prison is spent purposefully or in idleness has a massive influence on whether, after release, prisoners become useful members of society or simply continue their pattern of offending behaviour. Education, drug treatment and, most importantly perhaps, the opportunity to develop workplace skills and a regular routine in life should be regarded as essential elements of our prison regimes. It is therefore regrettable that the Government have again failed to take the opportunity given by the Gracious Speech to take any action to provide access to purposeful work for all prisoners. Many of our prisons have, I regret to say, been exposed as places of squalor and neglect, where prisoners are allowed to rot in idleness in an atmosphere where bullying and intimidation are rife.

Only last week, the outgoing chief inspector of prisons criticised the way in which the Government have increasingly sidelined his role and ignored his condemnation of poor conditions in many of our inner-city prisons and young offenders institutions. I hope that the Home Secretary will make the commitment to preserve the independence of the chief inspector's role. Despite the lack of any reference to prisons in the Gracious Speech, I hope that he will commit the Government to ensuring that our prisons are not allowed to decline further into places of idleness, neglect and intimidation.

The Home Secretary must take action to ensure that all prisoners are given the opportunity to use their time inside purposefully. His predecessor dismissed such ambitions

as impractical, but the Home Secretary can realise just how practical and effective they are by considering what has happened not only in other countries but here; for example, the arrangements put in place at HMP Coldingley in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins). Such measures will have an important effect on the chances of criminals deciding to turn their back on a life of crime and to live a law-abiding life after release.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): The intimidation and thuggery that the right hon. Lady mentioned undoubtedly goes on in many prisons and in young offenders institutions, where only recently someone committed suicide after intensive bullying. Is she aware that many of us, certainly those of us who served on the Home Affairs Committee and hope to do so again in this Parliament, believe that the new chief inspector of prisons should be no less rigorous than her predecessor? Perhaps I am in a minority, but I have many reservations about the fact that the outgoing chief inspector's contract was not renewed.

Miss Widdecombe: I do not wholeheartedly share those reservations, but I agree that the chief inspector's independence must be guaranteed, which is why I have made an issue of it. I hope that the new chief inspector will be as rigorous as her predecessor, if not more so.

Another issue that still requires attention is how our asylum system treats those who are fleeing persecution. It is therefore regrettable that once again the Gracious Speech contains no proposals for legislation to reform the current system. Last Friday, in a press release, the Home Secretary expressed his desire for an asylum system that would ensure that asylum seekers were treated with respect while cases were being processed, and

"where claims of persecution were not founded, decisive steps would be taken to ensure that the necessary steps are put in place for early return to the country of origin."

However, it is clear that we are still far from having an asylum system that delivers that.

In addition, we now have confusion about just how many failed asylum seekers are being returned to their country of origin. Only yesterday it emerged that the Government are deliberately manipulating—I use a neutral word—the figures to exaggerate the success of their policies. In future, dependants will be included in the figures for failed asylum applicants leaving the country, but the figures for those applying for asylum will continue to include only the head of the family. The arrival of an asylum seeker with six dependants is classified as one application, but when he is removed, that is classified as seven removals. Previously, both figures were compiled on exactly the same basis.

The change in Home Office recording of asylum figures has never been fully explained to Parliament, and the Home Office is so desperate to cover its embarrassment that last night, a spokesman made the extraordinary claim that there was no attempt to conceal the new method of calculation as it had been published on the Treasury website. No doubt they were concealed in a section that received even fewer hits than the Deputy Prime Minister managed to get in during the election campaign. Perhaps we can expect an assessment of the Chancellor's five economic tests, news of the number of foot and mouth cases or notices of changes in the social security regulations to appear on the Home Office website in coming months.

[Miss Widdecombe]

The Government's action, of course, will have the effect of inflating the number of removals and depressing the number of arrivals. We are just days into the new Parliament, and the Government have yet again been exposed as more concerned with spin and fiddling figures than with dealing with an asylum system that is grossly unfair to genuine refugees. On present evidence, the Government's action can be described only as blatant fiddling and deception. I challenge the Home Secretary to provide an explanation.

The Home Office's latest asylum statistics—if they have not been fiddled too—show that applications are still rising, and that those who appeal against a negative decision must face a growing backlog, especially in the appeals system, and massive delays. It is still the case that genuine asylum seekers, having fled here from real persecution, must struggle with a cruel and random system, and that people whose asylum cases have been rejected do not leave the country.

Only this month, a report by the immigration service union said that more than 130,000 people found not to be eligible for refugee status had vanished without trace to live and work illegally in this country. The head of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate at the Home Office has been forced to admit that the number of people who have gone missing is "very substantial".

There is nothing fair about that, and neither is it fair when genuine refugees have to face months of uncertainty while they wait for a decision on their asylum application or appeal. It is also clear that a system that is leading to a growing underclass of illegal and often exploited workers is not working in anyone's interests. However, despite the clear failings of the present system, and the Home Secretary's alleged desire—as extensively reported in *The Sun*—to address the failings of the asylum system, the Government have signalled that they have no intention of doing so. I hope that they will change their minds.

I have spoken about a number of important matters, but there is nothing more important than protecting the public. As I travel around the country I see, all too frequently, the results of the Government's failure to deliver. They have failed to deliver for the people of Britain and for our public servants, and they have failed to deliver what they promised.

Politicians may trade statistics, but people rely on their own experience. There are not many who think that things have got better. Not only has there been a failure of delivery, but all too often there has been a failure of common sense. Surely the victim's rights must prevail over the criminal's, rather than the other way around. Surely compensation payouts should be commensurate with suffering, rather than dictated by political correctness.

What is the sense in a system that grants compensation of a few thousand pounds when a breadwinner is lost, when hundreds of thousands of pounds are given to people whose feelings are hurt at work? Parents who try to restrain their children find themselves on the wrong end of the law. Citizens who try to defend themselves or scare off villains should not have to fear the law, but should expect to be protected by it. Citizens who go to another's aid should expect congratulations, not prosecution.

The system should be on the side of the law abiding. It also needs to have a sense of proportionality. The law should not be deployed against a parent who stops his child going out to prevent her from seeing drug dealers. A system that cannot cope with significant crime should not be invoked to deal with childish spats. When a judge gives a thief back the vehicle that he has stolen and orders the police to pay damages for depriving him of its use, we are living in an "Alice in Wonderland" world. When prisoners sentenced to six months are released in just six weeks, we have to wonder what even that world is coming to.

It is not surprising, therefore, that today there is a failure of confidence in the police, who are no longer visible in problem estates or rural villages. There is a failure of confidence in the law, which needs to be on the side of the victim, not the criminal, and there is a failure of confidence in politicians, whose duty it is to ensure that the law protects its citizens but who instead hide behind statistics and increasingly unbelievable promises.

Conservative Members have always believed in a smaller state and that people should be able to keep more of what they earn. However, there is a balance to be struck. There is no good in making a god out of reductions in public spending at the expense of quality of life. When we wanted to promote home ownership and encourage people to take a stake in society, we undertook an enormous loss to the Exchequer through substantial relief on mortgages. The result was that we increased people's quality of life and, in the long term, there were savings as people took responsibility for their homes and for maintaining them.

When we wanted to improve the quality of retirement, we used tax reliefs to encourage people to make their own pension provision. The result was that we improved the quality of people's retirement and, in the long term, brought savings to the Exchequer because people shared the costs of their old age.

Several hon. Members rose—

Miss Widdecombe: We want to improve the quality of life for people suffering the effects of crime almost as a daily consequence and also for people who are not living in deprived conditions but who nevertheless have to take measures every day against the possibility of crime. We want to turn society round so that we once again expect to come home from holiday and find that we have not been burgled, rather than saying, "Thank God we have not been burgled". That demands giving a high priority to crime prevention, tackling crime, increasing police numbers, making the police effective and having a visible police presence on estates and in rural areas. In short, making this country safe and ensuring that its citizens take that safety for granted must be our top priority. Any Government who fail to make that their top priority have failed in their first duty.

The Government were given a second chance. I very much hope that they will use that second chance to a great deal more purpose than they used the first one.

4.7 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): My congratulations on your election, Mr. Speaker, both to your constituency and to

the House. The new ministerial team and I are privileged to take over from the new Foreign Secretary and his ministerial team, building on the foundations that they have laid and on which we will build in providing for the action needed to protect people from crime and to provide fairness and equality in all Home Office activities.

I was given a video of a television programme made about three years ago called "How to be Home Secretary". It frightened me to death—it was all about clouds appearing in blue skies, and being overtaken by events. I was quite worried the other morning when someone pulled up alongside the kerb; I thought for a moment that my security men might have to intervene, but it was Lord Kenneth Baker, who leaned out of the window to say, "Remember, it's events, dear boy, it's events." So I am truly warned, including by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdicombe), about what is to come.

I should like to pay tribute to the right hon. Lady. I was about to say farewell, but she has not actually gone yet. I am genuinely disappointed that she is not standing in the Conservative party leadership campaign.

When the right hon. Lady talked of laying aside the god of public expenditure cuts and replacing it with the quality of life, I began to warm to her. I thought that she was going to outdo the shadow Chancellor on reform and social policy, but then she undid it all once again—what a shame.

I also pay tribute to the right hon. Lady on her stance and remarks during the past weekend about issues surrounding Thompson and Venables. She is right to say that some major issues need to be addressed on the back of the Thompson and Venables parole and the original hearing. I do not intend to talk about the forthcoming decisions of the Lord Chief Justice or the subsequent parole board in terms of other cases, but there are real issues with which to deal—the sort of accommodation in which juveniles are held in such circumstances and the way in which parole board hearings proceed. I will deal with those in the weeks and months ahead with my ministerial team.

On a lighter note, I must also tell the right hon. Lady that, as with many parts of her speech this afternoon, when she is good she is very, very good, but—

Miss Widdicombe: When she is bad she is horrid.

Mr. Blunkett: I would not have said so for a moment. I was going to say that the speech may have been her swan song, but a different bird springs to mind. I was in Egypt a little while ago with friends on holiday. It was late afternoon and the sun was balmy—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members will see why it was barmy. I heard something in the distance that reminded me of the House and asked what it was. For a moment, I thought that it was the right hon. Lady, but it turned out to be a hoopoe bird. Anyone who has heard that bird will know that she gives a pretty good imitation of it.

Miss Widdicombe: No, the bird was imitating me.

Mr. Blunkett: I did not know that the right hon. Lady had such a mischievous sense of humour. However, my friends told me that she is a damn good author. "The Clematis Tree"—[HON. MEMBERS: "Read it out."] It would

certainly take a long time. I gather that the book is both sensitive and poignant, and I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady for the work that she has done in her present post and in fighting the fight for the Conservative party with vigour and commitment.

My hon. Friends and I could agree with a number of passages in the right hon. Lady's speech. Apart from the fact that it costs a lot of money to improve the prison system, I do not think that there is any disagreement between us. There is a real need to improve what is called in the Home Office "the estate". There is a need to adapt it to the circumstances of the 21st century, to ensure that people are properly and vigorously put to work with a positive outcome—namely, that they do not re-offend. Given that, both with custodial and community sentencing, three out of five people do re-offend and that long-term prisoners are even more likely to do so, there is a great deal to be done.

I will not go into that subject in detail. It was not included in the Queen's Speech because it does not require legislation; it requires resources and will. Finally on that matter, we will be judged not by the people who end up in prison but by the number we prevent from having to be sent to prison. I want to get that on the record. There are now a record 66,500 people in prison—almost 50 per cent. higher than 10 years ago. That is not a record to emulate; it is a record to overcome.

In this debate—the final day of debate on the Queen's Speech—the Government will be making clear their priorities, on the record for people to see. Those are the commitments to order, to effective policing, to measures against antisocial behaviour, to reforming the criminal justice system and, yes, as it has been mentioned, the sentencing regime, as well as to reinforcing civil and community pride—active citizenship and community development, which have been badly eroded over the years and which must be lifted to the top of the political agenda.

This is not a job for Government alone; it is a job for our society, involving the development of economic and social policy, fair and effective immigration and asylum policy, equality of treatment and good race and community relations. What we need is not simply more legislation, but delivery: Government and people working together to create a civilised society—one that is enabled to take the necessary actions to ensure that people are not exploited or do not exploit others.

That is the view we take in respect of the deplorable incidents in Oldham and Burnley. The message is clear, and my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) reiterated it at Prime Minister's questions this afternoon. No one gains from disorder, antisocial behaviour or damage to people and property. No one will gain from what has happened in Oldham and Burnley unless we learn the lessons rapidly, not by conducting prolonged inquiries, but by ensuring that people sit down and work out action programmes together. We cannot have these matters simply referred up to Government, important as it is that we take action to support, to advise, and to look at the resourcing and the fairness of the way in which we treat these communities. The community itself should take on the challenge and the responsibility of doing the job.

Mobilising communities, as part of the solution, underpins our thinking in several key areas of Home Office responsibility and Home Office policy. On the

[*Mr. Blunkett*]

Cowley estate in Brixton, which I visited two weeks ago, I saw people pulling together to overcome the scourge of drug pushing and drug addiction. I saw people coming together, working with the police to overcome the scourge of petty burglary and of antisocial behaviour. It has been done in St. Paul's in the Walsall Heath area of Birmingham; drug pushers and prostitution were literally pushed out of the area.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald mentioned her visit to Hackney. There are examples across the country of communities coming together, supported by Government nationally and locally, supported by and working with the police, to make a difference to their area. The policy of the Home Office will be to pursue that approach with vigour; the civic agenda pursued by the active communities unit within the Department will engage with those issues as well.

With regard to the preventing and detecting and combating of crime, there can be no difference between politicians about the objectives. The issue is: how to set about achieving the goal. Overcoming disorder wherever it is, providing an answer to violent crime, will be paramount in restoring people's confidence in the system.

Those trafficking in drugs, in guns and in people must be first in the firing line of our policies, for all those people are our enemies, and that is why the proceeds of crime Bill will be so important to tackling the exploitation of others for the profit of a few.

As the amendment tabled by the Liberal Democrats this afternoon says, we will of course have to be vigilant about the safeguarding of civil rights and liberties, and the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald made mention of that this afternoon; but those who would use the proceeds of crime to buy the best legal advice in the country are not the victims but the perpetrators, not just of crime but of detriment to the life, liberty and freedom of others. No one, no matter how well-meaning, should use the justice system designed to protect the minority as a justice system to protect those who inflict injustice on others.

We must get the balance right. Of course we must take care to ensure that we do not end up with the wrong presumption about the wrong person, but I make it absolutely clear that there is no point in people's willing the intent if they do not also will the means.

I just sound a warning. Those who have the proceeds of crime at their disposal will buy the best legal brains, not merely to challenge when the Bill has become law, but to lobby and take action while the Bill is proceeding through the two Houses of Parliament. No one should make any mistake about that.

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State to his post. I do not think that there is very much between us on dealing with the proceeds of crime, but may I ask him about the balance between the liberty of the individual and the responsibility of the state? Again, the Government have in their agenda a proposal to take away from individuals the right to choose whether to be tried by jury, because, so the Government claim, abuse of that entitlement is widespread.

First, will the Secretary of State consider the figures that show that the number of people who use that entitlement has fallen, not risen? Secondly, if he believes that there is any logical link between taking away the right to jury trial and improving the criminal justice system, will he set out the justification for it—that was never done by his predecessors—because most people simply do not believe the Government?

Mr. Blunkett: I certainly will not do so this afternoon; I am awaiting, as is the Lord Chancellor, Lord Justice Auld's report, which my colleagues and I will consider carefully. We intend to dovetail his recommendations with our own thinking and with John Halliday's work, on which I shall comment in the next few weeks. I can promise that we shall seek radically to improve the administration of the court service in conjunction with the Lord Chancellor's office and the Attorney-General. It is important to do that if we are genuinely to deliver justice speedily and fairly. I do not think that there is anything between the hon. Gentleman and me on that matter, so the question on the mode of trial must be determined by the contribution that it makes to achieving those overall goals.

What I said about those who exploit others is equally true of those who profit from the misery of people who seek a better life across the world. Our approach, our procedures and our effectiveness must not encourage or enable organised criminals to exploit the immigration rules and, in doing so, to exploit those in desperate need. For the sake of success in developing communities that can welcome and embrace those who come from overseas, and to ensure good race and community relations, it is absolutely critical that we avoid unjustifiable fears being enhanced by organised criminals who clearly exploit our immigration processes, misleading others about what will happen when they arrive here; and that we want an immigration system that dissuades those whose claim of persecution is not justifiable from using other routes.

In the months ahead, I want, with my right hon. and hon. Friends, to spell out how we can develop an immigration policy, rather than simply having an obsession with asylum; how we can use a revised and updated work permit system; and how we can enhance what we are doing by considering the experience of green card proposals in places such as Canada—not to open the floodgates to people who believe that they can come to this country, but to provide sensitive and sensible routes by which we can deal with genuine claims.

The message to those who organise trafficking in people is very clear: we are not prepared to let them exploit those who land in our country only to have to be turned around and sent back. Where a claim of persecution is well founded, we shall deal with it quickly and effectively and—to paraphrase someone else—we shall ensure that there is a safe haven, not a soft touch. That safe haven must involve considering how we treat people better when they are here and how, when their claims have been justified, they are integrated not only in our communities, but in our nation, so that we have a nationality policy, as well as an immigration policy.

It is time to draw a line under what happened in the run-up to the general election and for everyone, including those who comment on public debate, to help us to look again at what we have been doing so that we get it right.

The Home Office team believes that the tremendous job done by my right hon. Friend, the new Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, and his colleagues has been underestimated. I visited the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in Croydon yesterday and was deeply impressed with the work there, as I have been by the work in Liverpool and Leeds and at our ports and airports. The new investment in fingerprinting, technology and the fast-tracking of cases is beginning to work only because investment has started to flow through and people are able to give time to those cases that need it.

A speedy appeals process—together with the removal of those people who have failed to make a justifiable claim—is paramount to getting the system right. Turn-around times for new arrivals is also important. However, that has to be built on a measure of trust and decent investment so that it is possible for immigration officers and those who work with them at the point of entry to do their job more effectively. The House must support those people who have the difficult job of removals, which was mentioned by the right hon. Lady.

The Labour manifesto said that in excess of 30,000 people who had not justified their claim would be removed by 2003-04, which is about 2,500 people a month. We have decided that that target must be met by early next year, which enables us to have a commitment to reach and exceed the 30,000 removals by 2003.

There has been no fiddling of the system—*[Interruption.]* I do not know about Treasury websites—I have enough problems handling my own without examining what Treasury officials are putting out on the Home Office's behalf. However, Opposition Members know, because they were vigilant in the run-up to the general election, that we dealt with the matter in April. It has not just been announced—

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): That does not make it right.

Mr. Blunkett: Opposition Members may say that that does not make it better, but they know that it was debated and in the public arena in April. I know about the inference in the stories in the *Evening Standard* and, this morning, *The Sun*—yes, I am an avid reader of that newspaper; I want to discover what is happening and to take account of it. Those stories were not new. They may have been newly released, but that is all.

Let me spell out what happens and why. There was a clear reason why the issue arose in the spring. When people claim asylum as head of the family, it is their claim that is reviewed to discover whether the alleged persecution is well founded. If the claim is agreed, the dependants that they have brought with them are treated in the same way. If it is refused, they and those who entered with them are removed, which makes them removals. *[Interruption.]* I am being heckled again, so let me put the arrangements on the record.

About 20 per cent. of justified removals are dependants. I promise the House that we will not only publish the number of removals, but break it down into heads of households and dependants. There will be no fiddling of Home Office statistics; instead, there will be clarity and transparency.

We will debate those statistics openly and fairly.

Let me say one other thing about removals. It is no good people rightly wanting to ensure that those who do not have a justifiable claim leave the country if, when measures are taken to remove them, crocodile tears are shed in the media. It will not be easy, and those who have to do it will have a difficult job, but it has to be done. We are determined to carry the policy through because it will be a prerequisite to dealing with, supporting and handling those who have a justifiable claim and allowing them to remain in this country fairly, openly and without the incipient racism that was implicit in the debate that took place some months ago.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): The Secretary of State referred to the fact that there will be consequences. The people whom we are talking about as statistics are the children of people who have claimed asylum and do not have a well-founded claim. Do we all recognise that the passage of time creates genuine compassionate circumstances in some cases where children are involved and deportation is conceived of? As we have not yet managed to make the decisions as fast as we might want to, there could be cases in which the act of deportation is unfair on children.

Mr. Blunkett: That is why we need a highly efficient system. I saw yesterday a massive speeding up of that system, and a great improvement in our ability to deal with people from the point at which they enter this country. There is still a growing backlog of appeals, partly because of the speed with which existing claims are being dealt with. Of course, there is a reduced number of applications now—14 per cent. down on the previous figures. That is very welcome. *[Interruption.]* It is no good the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald mumbling away. I give way to her.

Miss Widdecombe: Instead of mumbling, I will just ask it outright. Which previous figures? Not the figures that the right hon. Gentleman inherited, because the numbers are still up.

Mr. Blunkett: The figures to which I am referring are the year-on-year figures. The right hon. Lady knew that, because she is on top of the figures, but I hope that I am, too.

Geraint Davies: May I thank my right hon. Friend for paying a visit to Croydon and saying such kind words about the good job that is being done there? In Croydon we are now processing 100,000 cases a year and thousands more people are being employed. Some of them were concerned at the prospect of a possible Tory victory and the loss of their jobs.

More people are being removed than ever before. Will my right hon. Friend pledge that sufficient resources will continue to be given to turn round this difficult problem in an efficient and sensitive manner so that I can take that message back to the hard-working people in Lunar house?

Mr. Blunkett: I can certainly underline my hon. Friend's tribute to those who have been employed, without whom we could not have achieved the turnaround that is now taking place. I shall have a word with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor about the open cheque book that my hon. Friend requires.

[Mr. Blunkett]

Another aspect of the Queen's Speech consists of the police reform measures. To achieve the consensus that we all seek in terms of delivering a reform agenda—that consensus will have to range right across the police ranks and to those who work to support the police forces across the country—we need to accept that rapid progress will need to be made. We need a modernisation programme as much for the sake of those working in the service as for those who rely on it.

The disparities that exist between force performance are not acceptable. The disparities in some high-profile but probably peripheral matters such as sickness absenteeism, which varies by a factor of 80 per cent. across forces areas; the rate of medical early retirement, which varies between 5 and 58 per cent; and delivery measures, which we need to examine, all lead us to believe that change is needed. That is change not only in regulations and management but in the perspective on what the police force can do by working with others. We are therefore establishing a new standards unit, which will work with police services throughout the country, concentrating especially on the basic command unit. It will work with the police on spreading best practice, identifying management and delivery problems, scrutinising the way in which work on the ground gels with wider crime reduction partnerships and with our other policies, for example, on drug prevention and drug problems.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Do those changes include unilaterally sacking chief constables? On what basis did the right hon. Gentleman flex his new Home Secretarial muscles earlier this week to give a thinly veiled instruction to the Sussex police authority to sack the chief constable? What does that mean for the future of independent police authorities, which are responsible for operational matters? If the right hon. Gentleman is taking responsibility for operational matters on himself, will he take personal responsibility for the loss of 273 police officers in Sussex in the past four years?

Mr. Blunkett: I hope that the renewed morale and motivation of those in the Sussex service will lead to good recruitment and considerably improved outcomes. That is the intention of senior personnel in the force who wish to effect that. I shall not make a statement in answer to a question from the hon. Gentleman. Suffice it to say that I worked within my powers. I did not sack the chief constable of Sussex. I suggested to the police authority, which will receive a report from Lord Carlile next week, that, after three and a half years, it would be helpful if the matter were resolved. I am glad that the chief constable helped us to do that. The case emphasises the importance of an independent police complaints system, which we shall introduce in this Parliament. Not only independence, but speed and effectiveness of operation are important.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald asked about bureaucracy. One of the standards unit's tasks will be to examine the current process, from the moment of arrest through charging and the criminal justice system to conviction. At present the process is euphemistically described in Home Office parlance as attrition—I hope we shall find a better word, and one which means something to people outside—which means bureaucratic

delay: the process to which I referred earlier in answer to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey. I hope that we can reduce that bureaucracy.

I was pleased to accept the suggestion of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Police, Courts and Drugs that we should monitor immediately the way in which a police constable's average day is bedevilled by form filling and procedures that must be followed. They include not only updating technology, which, for many forces, is stuck in the 19th century, but the actual processes that constables have to undertake. We will do that because it will both lift morale and speed up the system to ensure effective outcomes.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): My question refers to the answer that my right hon. Friend gave the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). Does he agree that three and a half years is far too long to wait for action after the fatal shooting by police of an unarmed, innocent man? Does he further agree that it took his involvement for the chief constable of Sussex to act? Will my right hon. Friend consider further inquiries into the James Ashley case to gain the best information on reforming the complaints system?

Mr. Blunkett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the work that she has done over the past three and a half years with hon. Friends representing the areas covered by the Sussex force. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Police, Courts and Drugs will be meeting her and the family concerned on Monday. I hope that, together with the Carlile report, the continuing work of the Police Complaints Authority and the considerable help of the police authority itself, we will be able to make sense of the matter without a further public inquiry.

I am very keen—this is the answer to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton)—not to go through the niceties of process, but to get action from every level to ensure that we deal with cases fairly and openly, and that people on the ground know that police forces are addressing themselves to the fair, just and safe policing of their areas for the sake of everybody in those communities.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Blunkett: I shall give way to the hon. Member on the Liberal Democrat Benches.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I have listened with great interest to what the Home Secretary has been saying, particularly about the Police Complaints Authority. His comments will be most welcome in Wales. However, he has not yet said anything about the degree to which the powers will be devolved to the Welsh Assembly. Given that this is a debate about home affairs and the constitution, I was wondering whether he was planning to indicate the degree to which the Government intend to devolve such powers to the Welsh Assembly.

Mr. Blunkett: I shall be discussing those matters with the Secretary of State for Wales and other colleagues. I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman in the meantime setting out where we are on that point.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Blunkett: I shall make a moment's progress and then give way again.

We have also taken responsibility for the drugs unit from the Cabinet Office and will be integrating delivery and policy in a way that I hope will dovetail with our drive against organised crime. We have already said—I simply repeat it—that the job of the police, like that of the intelligence service, is to concentrate on the trafficking and pushing of category A drugs and their dangers in the local community. We shall be evaluating the experiment that Commander Brian Paddock of the Lambeth division is undertaking in London.

Norman Baker (Lewes): Although many in Sussex understand that there is considerable disquiet about the way in which the Hastings shooting occurred and has been subsequently investigated, there is also disquiet about the way in which the Home Secretary appears to have sacked the chief constable by press release, or encouraged that to occur. Will the right hon. Gentleman assure the House that his tenure as Home Secretary will not be characterised by instructions to police authorities and the diminution of their powers, and that he recognises that people who serve police authorities well have a genuine role to play? Their role, as well as that of the chief constable, has been undermined by his action.

Mr. Blunkett: I shall discuss with police authorities how they can do their job better and more quickly and be more accountable than some of them are at the moment. The job of Home Secretary is not to protect police authorities but to protect the public, and while I am in the job, that is what we will do.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I congratulate the Home Secretary warmly on his appointment and I wish him success in discharging his responsibilities.

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with the former Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), who told the House in a written answer that

"The number of people leaving a profession may be taken as an indicator of morale"?—[Official Report, 11 December 2000; Vol. 359, c. 65W.]

If he does agree with his hon. Friend on that score, why does he not accept that since Labour came to office, the 60 per cent. rise in resignations from the police service, the cut in police numbers of 1,600 and the dramatic reduction by more than 6,000 in the number of special constables constitute a damning indictment of his Government's record?

Mr. Blunkett: No, I do not accept that at all. Getting 1,353 additional recruits in the last 10 months of last year was a good indication that progress was being made.

I shall spell out in a moment our intentions regarding open and transparent targets—in fact, I shall do so now so that we are clear about where we start and where we are going in terms of police numbers. We have a commitment to 6,000 extra recruits which will be achieved by March 2003. However, it should be absolutely clear that police recruits and police in post are not one and the same. Although we will fulfil the manifesto promise on police recruits, I am keen to set targets also for police in post and full-time equivalents.

Let us assume that there are 125,500 police in post now and that we rapidly—by autumn—reach the number that the Opposition always use which, if memory serves,

is 127,158, the figure in spring 1997. In our manifesto we promised the greatest number of police in post ever—128,280. Let us say that we manage to achieve that by next year. Let us then assume—the previous Home Secretary mentioned this during the general election campaign, but it was not in our manifesto, nor is it a public service agreement target—that we reach at least 130,000 police within the lifetime of this Parliament.

I would like us to do better than that. If we do and if I am still Home Secretary when we do, I shall set a new target. I shall want the crime fighting fund to be renewed, because it was that fund and the direction given by the previous Home Secretary and his Ministers that achieved the uplift in numbers. The relationship between the chief constable, the police authority and the Home Secretary must be a positive one, because if Parliament wants more police and wants them on site, in the streets, available, accessible, there to protect against crime and the fear of crime, we must work together to ensure that that happens. I hope that that satisfies the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Bercow: I am not easily satisfied.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Beverley Hughes): That's your problem, not ours.

Mr. Blunkett: My hon. Friend is quite right about that.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I welcome the targets and the vision that my right hon. Friend is setting out for us today. However, we inherited from the Conservative Government the huge problem of the numbers of police taking early retirement. There are large disparities between different forces throughout the country: some forces, such as Staffordshire, are having to meet a greater cost than others in terms of pension payments. Will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that he will consider closely ways in which to meet the cost of those pensions, so that we can iron out disparities and set across-the-board targets for new recruitment on the ground?

Mr. Blunkett: I cannot give an assurance now on the meeting of the various pension requirements that are picked up by the devolved police budgets. There are enormous calls on the police grant: I cannot recall the exact figure, but a substantial percentage of the police budget—about one fifth—is now spent on police pension requirements, and there is an issue in terms of the impact in different parts of the country. None the less, my hon. Friend makes a valid point that needs consideration.

I have spoken for longer than I intended, but I should like to speak briefly about the criminal justice proposals in the Queen's Speech. We shall consult on the proposals from John Halliday and Lord Justice Auld; on the proposals made in the Command Paper "Criminal Justice: the Way Ahead"; and on other suggestions now being made to modernise court services and the criminal justice system and provide a far more effective way in which to bring those who have committed a crime to justice and deal with them and to deal with sentencing—in other words, the possibility of a penal code similar to those which apply in other countries. I offer the opposition parties an opportunity to participate.

[Mr. Blunkett]

There are few countries in the world that have the constant debate on these matters and the constant change that we have. There is more legislation than it is possible to spend time reading in this area. No sooner has a Bill been passed than another one is being passed to update it. I am still investigating which orders exist that have not yet been laid. The process goes back donkey's years. Over the recent past of the Home Office, the entire Department has been geared to legislation. It is time to get a grip on what we want to do, to settle it in this Parliament, and to allow our successors to settle down to implementing what we decide.

I offer the opposition parties the opportunity over the months ahead to work out, without prevarication, whether we can find consensus on the criminal justice system with the Lord Chancellor and the Attorney-General. Let us see whether we can work out a penal code and a sentencing system that are followed by the most appropriate measures to stop people offending, to reduce recidivism, to ensure that people are re-integrated and to protect our communities. I offer Back Benchers the opportunity to come forward to work with us, and to bring forward their suggestions on how they would wish to proceed.

It may be that the opposition parties will not wish to take up the opportunity. Obviously, the main opposition party will have to consider the matter following its leadership contest. However, it seems to me that it is time to stop the knockabout in this place and to deliver to those whom we represent.

4.52 pm

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I repeat my welcome to the new Home Secretary. He will recall that he has had many debates with me over the years, including long before we were both elected to this place. I thank him for what I think the House will accept was a reasoned, reasonable and constructive speech. I welcome his colleagues in the Home Department team. We have an entirely new team of Home Office Ministers—not a single stone unturned.

Mr. Blunkett: Not a single lawyer.

Simon Hughes: That might be a good thing.

I think that I am right in saying that although many Home Office responsibilities have been hived off elsewhere in the new Parliament, only one has been acquired—the responsibility for drugs that previously rested with the Cabinet Office. It was entirely logical that that should happen. I believe, however, that the number of Ministers has not decreased, so we have seen a slimming of responsibilities but not of the number of people in charge. That might be an issue to be dealt with in due course.

I join the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdicombe) in expressing my thanks to the Foreign Secretary. I was always grateful, as were my colleagues, for his courtesy in ensuring that we were properly informed, and invited to participate where appropriate. I hope that the new Home Secretary's offer, which my colleagues and I accept unreservedly, will continue a policy that we have always adopted from the Liberal Democrat Benches: to seek to be constructive and

to collaborate with the Government of the day, and to seek to agree where possible, and as far as that is possible, while reserving the proper constitutional duty to be constructively critical wherever we feel that it is necessary too.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald continues, as I do, to have home affairs responsibilities. We might not agree on a raft of matters, even though as her Member I seek to represent her to the best of my ability.

Miss Widdicombe: I voted Conservative, as did my mother.

Simon Hughes: The right hon. Lady tells me that both she and her good mother voted Conservative, I felt like saying, "You may know what you did, but I am sure that even if your mother did not vote Conservative she would not have told you." I welcome back the right hon. Lady; we should be grateful that, none the less, in this place she has always pursued Home Office matters with vigour, proper concern and integrity—qualities that unite the three major parties. We seek to contribute to these debates on the basis of what we believe is right for the country. I hope that in this Parliament we shall serve the country well.

Mr. Bercow: While we are on the subject of previous Ministers and are going through proper courtesies, will the hon. Gentleman take the opportunity to join me in saying that the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), whatever disagreements we might have had with him, was an exceptionally assiduous Minister, was unfailingly courteous and that many of us will miss him? We should be nice to the hon. Member for North Warwickshire but, if the Government are wise, they too should be nice to him.

Simon Hughes: I endorse that remark unreservedly and also pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien). As a final prefatory remark, I pay tribute to Jackie Ballard, who represented Taunton in the previous Parliament. Because of a few hundred votes, she cannot be with us today, but she served in our Home Office team with conviction and commitment. Many of us will miss her greatly. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) was rather more blessed by the electorate and now has a huge majority; he has joined our Home Office team, and we welcome him warmly. In addition, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and—

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Torridge and West Devon.

Simon Hughes: A Freudian slip—I apologise hugely and immediately. My hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) is here again to make sure that legal affairs are looked after properly by Liberal Democrat Members.

Liberal Democrats share with the Government what appear to be some central Home Office commitments: preventing crime, especially violent crime; increasing the detection rate, which is still abysmally low in England and Wales—25 per cent. on average; building safer communities; and clamping down on thuggish behaviour.

There is no real dispute between us on those commitments but, in this Parliament, more so than in the previous one, we must have polices that do not just sound tough on crime, but are much more effective in dealing with the causes of crimes.

As events in Bradford, Burnley, Leeds, Oldham and other places have shown, many of our urban and other areas have a legacy of inadequate education, an inadequate youth service and poor training and employment prospects. There is huge disaffection and a great lack of skills and self-worth among youngsters and many of their families. Members on both sides of the House will agree that those problems and a sense of alienation do not ever justify crime and violence, but they often explain it. When one adds the abuse of solvents, drugs and alcohol, there is a ready cocktail that we ignore at our peril.

In our society, it is far too acceptable that people will be verbally and physically abusive; it is far too acceptable that they will resort to knives and firearms; and it is far too acceptable that, when punished for wrongdoing, they sometimes go into custody, but come out hardly rehabilitated at all and highly likely to reoffend within a short period. The press release issued by the Home Office when the Home Secretary visited Croydon the other day stated that key among his objectives were the three Ds—delivery, delivery and delivery. That is what the country wants from the Government's second term; in many respects, they need to do better than the Home Office did in the last four years. Crime must go down, police numbers must go up and the statistics must be accurate and honest about not only such things but everything else.

If I may say so gently, I am glad that, in spite of the trailers that the Home Secretary put out before he took up his job, his speech today indicated that he is more concerned about being effective in dealing with the causes of crime and dealing with crime, and will leave aside any desire principally to get a reputation for being, as he said, much less liberal than his predecessor.

Mr. Blunkett: I did not say that.

Simon Hughes: Well, if the right hon. Gentleman did not, I am glad; that is another reassurance.

In the previous Parliament, there were two types of Home Office policy—some good, sound and well thought-out policy, which we supported, but far too many soundbites, gimmicks and short-term solutions that were never going to work. I hope that there can be a self-denying ordinance about those and that they can be left behind because, invariably, they raised expectations but often failed abysmally.

I understand that the Lord Chancellor's Department is to take on additional responsibilities that previously lay with the Home Office. We will work well and constructively with the Lord Chancellor and his colleagues on the human rights, freedom of information and data protection agenda, but that is no substitute for a modern Government department of justice. It is no substitute for a minister of justice, accountable to elected representatives and working with the Home Secretary on matters involving courts and related issues. I hope that the Government have not stopped their reform of Departments with their announcement at the beginning of this Parliament. We will seek to persuade them that if we

are to have a modern criminal justice system we need a modern structure and a Government Department to manage it. That reform has been far too long delayed.

Events of the past few weeks have highlighted the causes of crime around the country in places that we have all noted. We all share that concern. I have talked to people in each of the affected communities and I am aware of the way in which a single event can trigger a series of other incidents that can easily get out of hand. I hope that the lesson is always that we must seek to build and strengthen communities and to avoid stereotypes.

It seems to me that three fundamental concerns must be addressed, the first of which is inequality in our country. For as long as the likelihood of unemployment is so much higher in certain places, wards and communities, they are bound to have more problems. I was talking today to a friend in Harehills in Leeds, where because many youngsters have no expectation of success there is no reason for them to be restrained in their behaviour. The Home Secretary and I both represent inner-city constituencies and we know the score: the very rich live not far away from the very poor and disadvantaged. Unless we deal with that issue of inequality, many crimes of disaffection will continue.

Secondly, we need to deal with two of the fundamental causes of crime: drugs and alcohol. I hope that the Home Secretary and the Government will consider the idea of drugs courts. I am encouraged by the Home Secretary's response to the Metropolitan police policy that has been piloted in Lambeth. It is a pity that his predecessors did not agree to the proposal that we should have a standing body—it need not be called a royal commission—to advise on drugs policy in respect of all drugs, legal and illegal, including alcohol and solvents. If that proposal had been accepted some years ago, perhaps we would by now have had a report and further intelligent proposals. Drugs laws, whatever we may think about them, are clearly not working, and nor are the licensing laws. That makes it more likely that people will exploit and abuse drugs and alcohol.

Mr. Tony Banks (West Ham): The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about the war against drugs, which is clearly not being won. The royal commission is an excellent proposal from the Liberal Democrats. What is his own personal position on the decriminalisation of cannabis, and perhaps other drugs too?

Simon Hughes: I am happy to answer that, although I do not want to be distracted into that debate because my party has commissioned work, which is under way, to look at the Police Foundation report and its 80-odd proposals. My position is that we have to make sure that that work is presented to our party in the next few months. I hope that it will be a positive contribution to the debate in the House. The evidence is not overwhelmingly on one side, but I am absolutely clear that taking people to court for possession of recreational drugs rather than using police time to pursue the dealers, to whom the Home Secretary rightly referred, is a complete reversal of proper priorities, is against the interests of the police and the community and can alienate many individuals and communities. I am resisting the temptation to go further, not least because I am involved in the internal debate and we will shortly make proposals that I hope will help the debate in the House.

[Simon Hughes]

Thirdly, the Home Secretary is very alert to the issue of increasing racist activity in some parts of England and Wales and undoubtedly in other parts of the United Kingdom. In my constituency, as in others, right-wing groups have been seeking to be more active and peddle blatantly racist language and allegiance. Such activity has a harmful direct and indirect effect on those communities.

There is a dilemma for those who, like some other hon. Members and me, are liberal by nature in allowing free speech. I have always defended people's right to put their case, but people should be prosecuted when they use language, orally or in writing, that is clearly intended to incite racial hatred. Prosecutions do not always follow such language. Quite often, many people using such language are not prosecuted. Unless we have the security of knowing that people will be prosecuted when they break the law, the law is being taken for a ride and many communities will be hugely and dangerously disadvantaged.

Marches are another issue that I shall raise in my first or in another early meeting with the Home Secretary. The law is quite right in providing that marches should be banned only when there has been a proper consideration process and police take the view that they cannot manage them, but as right-wing groups seem to be able to stage one march after another, disrupting communities, increasing pressure and indirectly causing violent offences, we may have to re-examine public order legislation. Some freedoms are being abused by people with no interest other than causing harm to other communities. Such activities are doing no good in many of our urban areas and elsewhere and the legislation may need to be changed.

The Queen's Speech contains four Home Office Bills in addition to a draft Bill and two constitutional Bills that will be coming from elsewhere in the Government machine and have the involvement of the new Leader of the House, whom we welcome. Although only four Home Office Bills were trailed, a fifth has already been published. The Home Office is therefore living up to its usual reputation of promising much and delivering even more, even if it is not always quite what we would have wanted.

Mr. Bercow: The input is high, but the output is not.

Simon Hughes: Yes.

I realise that dealing with such a flood of legislation is very tough on civil servants, to whom I pay tribute. I was therefore encouraged and very positive about the Home Secretary's proposal, following that of his predecessor, that we should consider codifying the criminal justice system and the criminal law and seek to establish a permanent system, rather than consider a new criminal justice Bill every year, apparently to little effect.

The Home Secretary rightly said that in this Session we shall have the Halliday report on sentencing and Lord Justice Auld's report on the criminal justice system, both of which are welcome. Both reports, and the related legislation, merit very careful consideration. They should both first be put in the public domain so that a public response can be elicited and we can ensure, as the Home Secretary said, that the broadest possible consensus is

reached. Ideally, the legislation flowing from both reports should be considered in one or both Houses in a Special Standing Committee so that evidence can be taken and we can best consider how the proposals might operate.

I have one linked rather bold suggestion. I believe that it would be better if both those Bills, both of which are necessary, were considered in draft form in this Session and considered substantively in the next Session. Therefore, both the criminal courts reform Bill and the sentencing and criminal justice Bill should be consulted on this year and enshrined in legislation only later. The purpose of waiting is not to prevaricate or delay, but to ensure that we get it right rather than repent at leisure.

I hope that the three main parties agree that victims' entitlements should be the centrepiece of that legislation. I also hope that Liberal Democrat Members will persuade the Home Secretary that victims should be able not only to make a written statement to the court but, after conviction, to make an oral statement to the judge as well. Such a provision might be controversial, but I believe that it is hugely important to victims or their families.

I also hope that we will increase our efforts to ensure that our prisons and penal system work far more effectively. The Home Secretary knows well that, as the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald said, the prison system will not work properly until prison working days are truly working days; effective treatment for drug, alcohol or sex abuse and anger management are available; everyone who goes into prison is prepared for their release, which certainly does not happen now; and everyone released from prison receives continuing treatment and support.

I want to add a few words on the subject of the controversy of the past few days, about which there has been considerable agreement among the three parties. Our views on the right sentence for Thompson and Venables might have differed, but we are all of the same view that the killing of James Bulger was the most ghastly killing and we understand the anger, frustration, sense of loss and aloneness of his family.

Liberal Democrats have, however, taken the view that it is right that judges and the parole board, and not politicians, set sentences. The sentence has been set and those two young men will now be released.

It is highly important that we accept the courts and the rule of law and that those young men—who, as the Home Secretary rightly said, will be at the risk of being recalled for the whole of their lives—are allowed to start to repay something to society to make up for the terrible thing that they did eight years ago when they were of primary school age. I understand the difficulty in drawing the line, but the penal system is about punishing and then starting again; it is about rehabilitation and restoration. Nobody is beyond that new start in our criminal justice system and we must say that to everybody, loud and clear.

There will be a debate between hon. Members about civil liberties, although I hope that we can reach as much agreement as possible. On behalf of my party, I continue to express great concern that there might be an attempt to take away the right to choose jury trial. We think that that is a misplaced proposal that is not based on the evidence; it is not a necessary part of the criminal justice reforms.

Introducing more evidence of previous convictions is, in general terms, a bad and wrong thing to do in the criminal justice system. How can someone be tried fairly

for the offence with which they are charged if people know that they may have committed that offence or something like it before? Everyone will appreciate that that must normally prejudice a fair trial.

Another difficult issue is double jeopardy, any change to which could result in a change to many lifetimes of tradition. If the Government seek to change the law, they must proceed carefully, as we are dealing with the rights of people who have been tried and acquitted and who have been able to presume that they will not be tried again.

The criminal justice system must have the confidence of all the people, but we must be careful not to think that reducing the liberties of the defendant is not reducing the liberty of everybody. For example, someone who may have been a victim over the weekend in Burnley might be a defendant in a court case in Burnley in a few weeks' time. Liberties cannot be broken up like that. We do not enhance the liberty of a victim, or of any other citizen, by taking away their rights when they appear in front of a court charged with something of which they may be just as innocent as anybody else.

In that context, juries and lay magistrates play a significant part. They are ordinary people, playing a part in the criminal justice system. We disconnect ordinary people from the criminal justice system at our peril—the same applies if we disconnect young people from their communities—because another part of society becomes one that they do not own any more. I hope that we will resist moves to whittle down the rights of ordinary citizens to do their duty in the criminal justice system, which many of them have done, to our great benefit, over many years.

We must act better to acquire the proceeds of crime, on which I share the Home Secretary's objective. There are, none the less, difficult civil liberties and human rights issues and we will want to look at the matter very fully. We must ensure that we seek first a criminal conviction as a preliminary to acquiring any proceeds. Only if that cannot be achieved should we go down the route of acquiring on the basis of the balance of probabilities.

The House will consider an order under the Football (Disorder) Act 2000 before the summer recess. Being a veteran of last year's debate on the subject, I understood that before an order was introduced and the provisions of the Act extended we would see a report on its working. We have had the working party report, but no report on the Act has been laid before the House. I remind the Home Secretary that if he wants to persuade us to renew the Act he must first produce the right documents and evidence.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): In a long, thoughtful, thorough and wide-ranging speech, the hon. Gentleman has yet to mention punishment. Given the righteous indignation and anger that he says victims feel, should not the criminal justice be retributive, at least in part? Not every criminal is a sick person in need of treatment or, as the hon. Gentleman puts it, anger management. Does he agree that some criminals are people who have made selfish, greedy and violent choices, and that they should be punished?

Simon Hughes: Of course I agree that people must be punished. Retribution is not normally the reason for the measures taken by the criminal justice system.

Occasionally, courts pass sentences that are meant to set an example, and rightly so. People should be punished when they do wrong, and I understand why some people might reasonably think that the sentences in the Bulger case may not have been punishment enough. My point is that when punishment ends, rehabilitation must continue, and we must then seek always to wipe the slate clean.

I want to pay tribute to the police. They are extremely important and, by and large, they do a good job. The country wants more of them, and tomorrow the Home Secretary may even announce that the numbers are beginning to pick up again. That is not before time. In the previous Parliament, the Labour party did badly by the police and the country on this matter: there were fewer, rather than more, police on the beat; morale went down rather than up, and more officers left the force than ever before. Although there was continual talk about reforming police pensions, nothing happened. The police often told me, as they will have told the Home Secretary's predecessor, that they felt that the Government were being tougher on them than on the criminals. There is a summary view about what we need to do for the police. The Government and the country need to do better.

The need is not only one of having more police. I hope that the Home Secretary will be positive about our idea of having part-time, paid police, so that we can employ those who cannot do a full-time job or who are coming up to retirement. I hope that he will consider introducing community safety forces, employed by local councils as a supplement to, and support for, the police. I hope also that the Government will be positive about the idea, endorsed by chief police officers and others, of having a standing conference on the police. There could then be regular public debate between police officers of all ranks, the Government, politicians, police authority members and others, and a regular assessment of what is needed for better recruitment and retention, including factors such as pay.

We welcome the proposal for an independent Police Complaints Authority, which is long overdue. I hope that the Home Secretary will revisit his predecessor's refusal to hold an inquiry into deaths in custody. I also share the view expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes and others that as long as we have independent police authorities and forces in England, the authorities, rather than the Home Secretary, however strong his feelings, should choose their chief constable and decide when he should leave.

I welcome the Home Secretary's moderate tone on asylum and immigration. I look forward to the removal of the voucher system, which is not only discriminatory and extremely offensive but more expensive than putting people on benefits.

There was another omission in the Queen's Speech. The Home Secretary's predecessor promised equality legislation to deal particularly with the fact that we do not have religious equality in this country. Members of several faith groups, especially the Muslim community, are urgently waiting for that. Liberal Democrats believe that as soon as we get equality legislation, to deal not only with that but with civil partnerships and the repeal of section 28, among other things, we will have a fairer society.

Two Bills will focus on constitutional reform: one of them will increase the number of women in the House, and the other will reform the House of Lords to make it a

[Simon Hughes]

more representative second Chamber. Liberal Democrats support both Bills, as far as they go, but we strongly believe that we must seize this opportunity to look at what both Houses do and how they relate to each other. We must also look at how people get to Parliament. Unless we do that, the danger is that reform will not go far enough, and that the public will not be engaged in the democratic process nearly enough.

Increasingly, people find what we do a turn-off. The statistics are sad and disappointing. The House has become unrepresentative, and that is sad too. It is not just that there are too few female, black or Asian Members but that there are only a few young people in the House and very few older people. Parliament does not look or sound like Britain.

Turnout at the election was very low. In Liverpool, Riverside, which was regarded as a safe seat, turnout was as low as one third of the electorate, although in the much less safe seats of Winchester or North Norfolk it was higher than 70 per cent. Those figures hint at the direction that must be taken.

There will soon be a new leader of the Conservative party, and the new Labour Government are already in office. I hope that, in the interests of democracy, all parties in the House will look seriously—and soon—at the need to reform political representation in this country. The Tories won no seats in west Yorkshire, south Yorkshire and Wales, even though they received 30 per cent. of the vote or similar in those areas: something is badly wrong.

People are being deprived of their say. In Surrey, 20 per cent. of the electorate voted Labour but they have no representatives. In Kent, 20 per cent. of the electorate voted Liberal Democrat but they have no representatives.

Mr. Banks: How did we all get here then?

Simon Hughes: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we all got here by the strange and funny system that we inherited a long time ago.

We need a system in which the balance of background and gender is correct but which allows people to get what they vote for as well. The constituency of Tatton was represented by Martin Bell in the previous Parliament, and he was respected because he said, "A plague on all your houses. The system is not up to the job." The hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) was elected because people are increasingly moving away from the political parties rather than towards us.

Parliament must be more representative. The power of Back Benchers must grow, rather than diminish. The power of the Whips must diminish, not grow. All hon. Members must have increased power to hold the Government to account. Unless such fundamental change is introduced, the danger is that democracy will become a minority activity. In such circumstances, discussion about the contents of programmes outlined in Gracious Speeches to come will matter less and less to more and more of our fellow citizens.

If the Government are to be remembered for significant progress and reform, they will have to be much braver and more effective about the Home Office agenda and constitutional reform. The country is waiting for that

radical approach. Liberal Democrats will support the Government if they are willing to be brave, but we will be extremely critical if they become as conservative as they have been for the past four years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I remind the House that Mr. Speaker has imposed a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

5.24 pm

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): I begin by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on his appointment. He has a hard task before him in following the work done by his predecessor, our joint right hon. Friend the new Foreign Secretary. However, I am sure that the new incumbent is up to the job.

I know that a lot of new hon. Members will make speeches about their constituencies, so I shall confine my remarks to what is happening in my area now.

Twenty-two years ago, when I made my maiden speech, I did not mention the problems of crime, drugs and outlandish, loutish behaviour because they were not particularly significant in my inner-city seat. They certainly are today, however, and the situation is, quite frankly, out of hand. The drugs problem used to be confined principally to the Kings Cross part of my constituency. It is still in Kings Cross, despite everyone's efforts, but it has spread right across the constituency and, indeed, across central London as a whole.

Parts of the area that I try to represent sometimes feel like an outdoor supermarket, dominated by street drug traders. They make my constituents feel threatened and alienated on the very streets where they live. People talk about civil liberties, but I am willing to take away a lot of drug pushers' and drug possessors' civil liberties if they are going to take away the civil liberties of my constituents, who are entitled to the quiet enjoyment of their homes and streets. Old people and toddlers are faced with used needles on doorsteps, needles thrown down in children's playgrounds, put in window boxes or in flower beds. People are no longer threatened at the point of a gun but at the point of a used syringe. Recently, a woman was robbed at the point of a used syringe and, one of my local doctors tells me, then stabbed with it. Now she is awaiting the results of a blood test to see whether she has HIV. That sort of behaviour is going on within about half a mile of where I am standing. It is wrong, and we must take stronger measures to deal with it.

All sorts of security measures have been introduced. People are turning their homes, blocks and flats into fortresses. In one block in my area, a notice went up only a couple of days ago saying that used heroin syringes had been found on the fire escape of the stairwell on the second floor and that, as they can be dangerous, the estate manager or caretaker should be contacted to dispose of them immediately. Gangs of lads are using heroin and cannabis inside the block of flats.

People are entitled not to live in those conditions, and we are letting them down. I do not blame the local police, who put in a huge effort. Special operations include Operation Welwyn, which has been going on in Kings

Cross for a long time, and Operation Regis, which has been carried out in the Kings Cross area recently with special funding from the Government.

There is an element of displacement: when short-term attacks are made on drug takers in a particular area, they get displaced to other areas. However, it is not just a question of displacement; it is going on all over my area. A new operation covering part of Soho, Covent Garden and the Bloomsbury part of my constituency—Operation Lilac—is working fairly well. It involves the health service. People are faced with prosecution or with being helped to overcome their habit. That is a good special effort, but there is displacement. The trouble with all these special efforts is that they are short term: when they come to an end, the problem arises again.

The police tell me—the figures bear this out—that they are attempting to concentrate their action on the dealers rather than the people in possession. They are finding it difficult because some of the dealers and those with whom they deal are now so familiar with one another that the dealers will sell only to people they know to be their usual customers. Even police in plain clothes are finding it difficult to get the dealers.

I am, admittedly, extremely reactionary on the subject of drugs. I think that we should contemplate introducing a concept of aggravated possession. If people are in an area where drug dealing is known to go on but do not live or work there, if they are in possession of drugs but are not registered addicts and are not trying to get treatment, I think that they move into a different category and should be treated as such. We must stop both the dealers and the people with whom they deal.

We certainly need more police and, at last, recruitment is going up, but the Metropolitan police force is wasting a huge amount of time. I shall give two or three examples. Half of the 999 calls made to the Metropolitan police are not serious. To the best of my knowledge, no one has been prosecuted for making any of the 1.2 million hoax calls that were made in the past year.

In the last year for which figures are available, 80 per cent. of burglar alarms—I refer not to those that go off and keep people awake at night, but to the ones that ring in police stations and to which the police have to and do respond—to which the Metropolitan police responded were false alarms. If some batty old lady kept ringing them up and it was a false alarm, the police would prosecute her for wasting police time. Those alarms are a systematic waste of police time and the management of the Metropolitan police should pay more attention to the problem.

We need more money and recruits. The Metropolitan police certainly need to speed up their recruitment process and to shorten the period between someone's application to join and when they become a working policeman or woman.

We also need other measures that do not relate directly to the police. Known drug dealers operate out of individual flats in blocks. Under the present law, it takes months to get them out. The system is so slow that it makes a two-toed sloth seem hyperactive. It is useless. The council and the police do not have the necessary powers. Dealers are making people's lives a misery for months on end. More rapid attention must be paid to them and to getting them out.

The other major problem in my area is the significant increase in the amount of plain loutish behaviour. It is also a characteristic over the boundary in Westminster, as my former right hon. colleague, who is shortly to become Lord Brooke, would agree. The west end on a Friday and Saturday night is full of a lot of drunken people being particularly obnoxious.

The police have not told me this, but I am fearful that, with about 150,000 half-drunk people roaming the streets at 11 pm or midnight, some minor incident will turn into a huge riot with a lot of drunks beating each other up and having a right old go throughout the area. We must pay attention to that loutish behaviour—it is a powder keg.

I welcome the postponement of the Bill to introduce 24-hour boozing and the 24-hour city. It may be possible to allow that, but we must have nuisance laws in place in parallel, so that when places become sources of disorder and nuisance the police can close them down there and then and people do not have to resort to the courts and face months of delay to end the ruination to their lives.

I am sorry to have to make this speech; I am sorry that the situation exists. People in my area have never been so sickened by the amount of crime and the loutish behaviour and drug taking. I am confident that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will want to do something about it and will do something.

5.34 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Like the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), it is a little while since I gave my maiden speech—18 years ago, not 22 as in his case. Like him, I did not mention the problems of crime and disorder.

I devoted my maiden speech to defence. It is a tribute to the previous Conservative Government that defence is now so much on the back burner. Thanks to the robust policies followed by previous Conservative Prime Ministers, we have successfully dealt with that threat. However, we still face the threat posed to our cities and rural areas by lawlessness. I want to say a little about that later.

Everyone who loves this place should be very concerned indeed about the appallingly low turnout in the general election and should be asking themselves why people apparently have so little faith in the democratic process. One reason is that politicians, even those armed with very large majorities, appear to lack the courage of their convictions, and I am disappointed that the Government, who have already been in power for four years and now have an enormous majority, have produced a Queen's Speech that is so lacking in radical cutting edge. I should like to say a few words about that.

Above all, we need Governments who believe in justice, in telling the truth and in reaching a decision and putting that decision fairly to the British people. In their handling of two subjects—the constitution and Europe—the Government show a lack of justice, a lack of firmness and a lack of conviction.

On the constitution, devolution is now in place and, although we have argued about the West Lothian question for four years, there is still no answer. Our English constituents are still faced with the fact that Scottish MPs vote on our health, education, policing, agriculture, transport, housing policy and much else, whereas we have no say on Scottish matters. We should point that out again and again because it is a denial of natural justice.

[Mr. Edward Leigh]

Over the years, many solutions have been proposed. There is the federal solution, advocated by the Liberal party; and there is the solution advocated by my right hon. Friends on the Front Bench, and which I favour—that Scottish Members should not be allowed to vote on exclusively English matters. But it is a matter of justice, and it must be dealt with. The Government cannot ignore it.

On reform of the House of Lords, we are still waiting for a definitive answer to the question of what will happen to the second Chamber. In a democracy, one cannot have a situation where half the legislature is entirely appointed; it does not work. Something must be done. I personally favour an elected House of Lords. I believe that the House of Lords must be based on the traditional counties. If we are to retain an appointed element, the appointed element can no longer be appointed by the Prime Minister. In a modern democracy, people will not accept that so much patronage over the legislature is given to the head of the Executive.

On Europe, too, people are crying out for conviction politics and for guidance from the Government. We cannot continue with the policy of "wait and see" on the euro. It is bad for the constitution, for business and for our country, and it is incumbent on the Government to reach a conclusion on that. I see no reason why there should not be a referendum within the next two years. Let us decide the question once and for all.

My personal view is absolutely clear: I am opposed, on constitutional grounds, in principle, to the scrapping of the pound. I would put that view—I am happy to do so, as are many of my colleagues—to the British people. The Government cannot continue to play around with this issue. Let us have a referendum—let us sort this out once and for all and move on to other things. Let us then try to base our relationship with the European Union on an element of honesty.

Everyone else in Europe is perfectly honest about their aims; there is no doubt about that. I am happy to remain in a European Union that concentrates on trade matters, environmental protection and good relations between nation states. I cannot accept the Europe that seeks to control our foreign and defence policy, our currency, our taxation, our justice and immigration. I believe that the point of view that I am advancing is rational and should be debated. Let us have the referendum now and get this issue out of the way. Everyone else in Europe apparently knows their mind. Why is it only in this country that the Executive are incapable of giving clear guidance to the people?

Let me pass on quickly to home affairs. Why are people so disillusioned? They are disillusioned because, every year, we have a new criminal justice system and, every year, it appears to make so little difference on the ground. What do people want from their chief constables? They want visible policing. Despite the fact that we have put so much pressure on the Government, why is the number of special constables still in catastrophic decline?

I agree that we cannot afford to employ as many regular policemen as we would like, so why do we not pay special constables? Many people are anxious and willing to give of their free time to the public, so let us get them back into the villages and on to the streets. The people are

crying out for visible policing. They are not crying out for yet another criminal justice system; they want to see policemen.

Before I finish my speech, let me say one or two things about the public services. There is enormous dissatisfaction with the public services and, again, there is a lack of honesty about what is going on in them.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is going wide of the amendment that is being debated today in referring to the public services.

Mr. Leigh: I understand that one is entitled to range over all the matters in the Queen's Speech.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. There is an amendment, tabled by Her Majesty's Opposition, on today's Order Paper.

Mr. Leigh: Well, I am sorry that I have to be constrained by the Liberal Democrat amendment. I was under the impression that one was entitled to range over many matters.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We are debating the amendment tabled by the Conservative party.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am very reluctant to challenge your ruling, but Mr. Speaker made it plain this afternoon that the House will vote on the Liberal Democrat amendment, so surely it is permissible to speak about any subject dealt with in that amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I must advise the hon. Gentleman that the debate is on the amendment that has been selected by Mr. Speaker, and that curtails debate.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is a serious point. Mr. Speaker has selected the Liberal Democrat amendment for a Division. That amendment most certainly touches on public services, so it would be extraordinary if we were not allowed to debate an amendment on which we shall vote just after 10 o'clock.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I advise the hon. Gentleman that the Liberal Democrat amendment has been selected for a Division, but not for debate.

Mr. Leigh: If I am not allowed to talk about issues of importance to the public, it is a sad reflection on how we order our affairs. I believe that we need to reform the procedures of the House and to ensure that Select Committees are strengthened, and I support what the Liberal Democrats are trying to achieve in that respect. It is important that we try to strengthen the role of Back Benchers in our affairs and that the Government should produce clear policies that the people understand. We are not being honest in the way in which we address the great issues of the day, especially health and education. People care about those issues, and we are not meeting their aspirations. The way in which our proceedings are conducted in the House is not meeting those aspirations. We are not having an honest debate.

Surely people want to ensure that an operation is available when they fall ill. They ask us why they should contribute all their lives to the national health service if operations are not available to them when they reach a certain age. They ask why they have to pay twice: they pay through taxation for operations, which are either denied to them, or they are told that they must wait two or three years; and they have to pay again, through the private sector.

A lot of work is being done on such matters—for example, by the Institute of Directors—and there are interesting and radical ideas. For example, if people are denied an operation, the state should give them a credit towards a private operation, so that the difference between the private and the public sectors would be blurred.

We need to consider similar ideas in education. If people do not receive the state education that they believe is their right as taxpayers and prefer to use private education, the state should provide a credit towards it. Those are interesting and radical ideas. To give them credit, in their proposed education Bill, the Government are starting to break down the barriers between the private and public sector in education, which we are debating in this Queen's Speech debate. They have already done it in health with their concordat. Why can we not have an honest debate? Why do we have this rigid divide?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's time is up.

Sir Patrick Cormack: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Would you be kind enough to clarify the ruling that you gave earlier? It has always been the convention of the House that, in the debate on the Queen's Speech, it is permissible to discuss any subject in the Queen's Speech on any day, even though certain days are earmarked for certain subjects. I have never known of a Member being prevented from touching on other subjects in the Queen's speech. As your ruling affects every hon. Member, wherever he or she sits, I should be grateful to know whether you have changed that age-old practice.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I reiterate that we have today, as we had yesterday, a particular amendment on the Order Paper. Therefore, we are debating that amendment. Incidental reference to other aspects of the Queen's Speech is acceptable.

5.46 pm

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): I welcome my right hon. and hon. Friends to their new positions and look forward to working with them. It is good to be back among my friends on the Back Benches. I enjoyed my visit to the foothills of government, but after two years as the lowest form of ministerial life, I concluded rightly or wrongly that I would be of more use to my constituents, the Labour party and the human race in general if I returned to the Back Benches and, I hope, to the world of Select Committees. I hope that my experience in government will make me a more effective scrutineer of the Executive.

I shall start with a couple of general points. For the avoidance of doubt and to avoid being listed among the disappointed, may I say that I am broadly content with the general direction of Government policy? I shall not,

therefore, unlike other refugees from government, be offering my thoughts exclusively to the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph*. Of course, were I Prime Minister, which by some inexplicable oversight I am not, I would do one or two things differently. I hope that this Parliament will see a little less managerialitis, fewer targets, fewer initiatives, less spinning and an end to naming and shaming. We should accept that some degree of initiative must be permitted at local level, recognising at the same time that there must be a role for the Government in making sure that certain core services are delivered.

On public services—which I refer to in passing—we must avoid talking ourselves into a depression. Yes, they are under strain as the result of years of underinvestment. Yes, they need better management and more resources. But to use expressions such as “third world”, which I have seen occasionally, is hysterical nonsense, and we should not pander to it.

For most of our constituents, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) graphically illustrated, the main problem is not organised crime but disorganised crime. Reversing the rising tide of yob culture is one of the greatest challenges that the Government face. It is the single greatest issue in parts of my constituency, as it is in his. I am sure that it is also the biggest issue in the constituencies of other hon. Members, especially those who represent poorer parts of the country.

Many of my constituents are plagued by out-of-control youths and yob neighbours, against whom the law appears powerless. All too often, bad behaviour goes unchallenged. It does not bring consequences to anyone but the victim. People come to my surgeries shaking with fear, and all too often I end up evacuating the victim rather than the villain.

Effective policing and an effective criminal justice system are a precondition of regeneration. It is no use pouring money into the most devastated parts of our inner cities if some of our citizens are tearing them down as fast as we can rebuild. Despite the undoubted progress of recent years, it remains a sad fact that our criminal justice system is wholly inadequate to protect us against persistent young offenders. Many are being repeatedly bailed, walking out of the court door and resuming their activities within hours. They are laughing at us.

We must recognise that some youths are too badly damaged to be capable of reform and they are causing mayhem. Our priority must be to give their victims a rest from their activities, if necessary by locking them up. That is the harsh reality and I do not shrink from it. Successive Home Secretaries have promised more secure detention places for juveniles, but delivery has been slow. I hope that this will be speeded up. In the meantime, we must concentrate our efforts on helping younger children to grow up and lead useful lives, in the hope that they will not disappear down the same plughole as some of their older brethren.

The Home Secretary will come under pressure to pour more resources into policing without paying too much attention to how effectively it is spent. I hope that he will resist that temptation. The first requirement is to obtain value for the very large sums that are already invested in policing. As he will know, there are extremely wide variations in the quality and management of policing as between one force and another. In Sunderland, I am glad to

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say, it has improved immeasurably in recent years. I look forward to the police Bill, which will contain measures to improve discipline and complaints procedures, some of which were proposed in the Select Committee report that was produced under my chairmanship three years ago.

Details of the crime Bill are a little sketchy, but I have a suggestion: one aspect of the yob culture which urgently needs addressing is the number of out-of-control youths with air weapons. No week passes without some new horror story. Last week, for example, a youth in Cardiff shot and injured four children in a school playground. It is incredible that no licence is required for an air weapon and that anyone over 14 can own one. It is necessary urgently to reduce the number of air weapons in circulation, and the crime Bill is an obvious opportunity to do that. Once again, the Home Secretary will find that there is a helpful Select Committee report on the stocks. I urge him to dust it down.

Drugs lie behind a great deal of crime and the ruin of many young lives. My right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras graphically illustrated the problem. Enormous efforts have gone into combating the drug culture and I do not seek to denigrate them. I wonder, however, whether we are having a serious impact. Perhaps the time has come to consider a new approach.

The Home Secretary will have seen a recent series of articles in *The Guardian* by Mr. Nick Davies. I know that he is not my right hon. Friend's favourite journalist, but I hope he will agree that Mr. Davies has made some serious points that require equally serious examination. Legalisation is traditionally a subject on which politicians fear to tread. Let me hasten to add that I am not yet persuaded, but given that everything else has failed, I wonder whether the time has come to contemplate the unthinkable. That may well be something on which the Select Committee can be helpful.

I hope that Select Committees will be functioning by the summer and I would welcome an assurance on that from my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. I hope also that he is considering ways in which Select Committees can be made more effective. He will have seen the recent report by the Hansard Society and the report by the Liaison Committee, "Shifting the Balance", which incidentally was brushed aside a little too hastily. I hope that my right hon. Friend, who has a reputation for radical thinking, will take them seriously.

I also hope that hon. Members will take Select Committees seriously. We cannot expect Ministers to do that if we do not. The first rule for an effective Select Committee member is to turn up on time; the second is to keep one's backside on the seat throughout the sitting; the third is to ask concise, relevant questions, for which short training courses can be arranged if necessary. After that, we can have a discussion about powers and resources. For what it is worth, it is my view that the only hope of making Select Committees function effectively is to create an alternative career structure for Back-Bench Members; otherwise we are for ever destined to see the best and the brightest seduced away by office or the prospect of office.

If we sometimes wonder why the House and our profession in general do not enjoy the public esteem that we believe we deserve, at least part of the solution lies in our own hands. We do not have to award the Government

a three-month holiday from scrutiny every summer; we do not have to ask lollipop questions; and we do not have to let the Executive select those whose job it is to scrutinise them. Those are things that we choose to do—and we can equally well choose not to.

5.55 pm

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin). We worked together on various issues, especially Northern Ireland, and I was sorry when he decided to resign from the Front Bench. On a Government Bench that contained a number of junior Members who were faceless apparatchiks, he shone as being extremely capable and able.

This is not a maiden speech, but a semi-retread speech. A proper retread speech is when one moves to another constituency. I am in a small and select group of two people who are quasi-retreads because we represent our former constituencies. It is, of course, an honour to be elected in the first place for one's home constituency, but to be re-elected is a substantial honour, and I feel humble about it. All new Conservative arrivals need to have some humility. They are part of a parliamentary party that is in opposition, and we have much to learn so that we can contribute constructively to our task.

I pay tribute to my predecessor. I also pay tribute to his predecessor, because if he had not worked hard over the years, I would probably not be here today. My immediate predecessor, Dr. George Turner, was an effective representative for North-West Norfolk. He worked extremely hard in Parliament and the constituency. He dealt with a heavy case load and established an effective team in King's Lynn to deal with people's problems. It is sad for him that that team is being dismantled. He must feel like I did four years ago and think that all his work has not been rewarded at the polling stations. That is what happens in politics; it is a rough trade. However, we must move on.

I pay tribute to some of my predecessor's achievements. He worked hard to bring Ministers to King's Lynn. As a consequence, we received pledges on key local issues such as the Hardwick flyover at the junction of the A10 and A47, the regeneration of the Anglia Canners site in King's Lynn, and the Nar-Ouse regeneration area—the NORA scheme—which will greatly regenerate an area of King's Lynn that has been blighted for many years. He secured pledges from Ministers on those important projects and it will fall to me to ensure that they are honoured by the Government. I shall work as hard as possible to make sure that those promises are kept. As we got nearer the election—I am sure this was no coincidence—more and more Ministers came to the constituency and made more and more pledges, which I shall hold them to. That work must continue.

King's Lynn is a great historic town. It has remarkable churches and extraordinarily beautiful Georgian buildings. However, it also suffers from the blight caused by the neglect of the areas that I mentioned and of the state of the high street. Anyone who goes into King's Lynn will be horrified at the number of empty shops, which generates a sense of depression and gloom. We have a strong local economy that has been built on the tradition of working hard for self-sufficiency, and on the

entrepreneurial drive of many small businesses. Although we have a thriving small-firm sector, we need more investment. I do not think we will get that unless something is done to sort out the high street and to implement the schemes that will regenerate it. We need to attract more business and engender more development. I shall work hard to achieve that, because I fear that all the regulations and burdens on small businesses mean that much of the spirit of wealth creation that has been built up in the past few years will start to suffer.

King's Lynn is the centre of the constituency, but one does not have to travel far outside it to find truly stunning countryside. Inland from one of the most beautiful stretches of coastline in the country are many small villages, most of which I visited in the election campaign. I found genuine anger, frustration and isolation because of a Government who have forgotten and neglected rural communities.

We are considering not only a crisis in agriculture. Many farmers in North-West Norfolk continue to keep stock, especially pigs. They live in daily fear of foot and mouth disease. The crisis is not confined to small post offices or lack of rural transport. There is a perception that the Government do not care about the rural communities. That was summed up by the Prime Minister's contribution to "Question Time" during the election campaign. He said that he did not care about votes in the rural communities. That is a small step from saying that he did not care about rural communities.

Above all, those communities feel isolated and that the Administration are remote. What, according to the Gracious speech, will the Government do to help rural communities? Nothing whatsoever. There will be a Bill on hunting. During the election campaign, I met one voter who was anxious about hunting, but thousands who were worried about rural crime.

Rural crime and the lack of a visible police presence in west Norfolk are a genuine problem. I pay tribute to the police officers who work tirelessly and do their best to provide policing on the ground. There are far too few, however, and their morale is low. They are worried about the extent of the burden of paperwork that is placed on them, and about bureaucracy and retention. Now is not the time to start tampering with police pay and conditions. Morale is low, and if the Government want to fulfil their promises on law and order, they must win the support and trust of the police. That also applies to health and education; they must win the trust of teachers, doctors and nurses in order to fulfil their promises.

People mentioned the Tony Martin case during the election campaign. It was a big issue in west Norfolk. Many people believe that Tony Martin was the victim of a crime. Many others believe that we cannot make law on the basis of one tragic, unfortunate case. But consulting one of the burglars who broke into Tony Martin's house on the length of the latter's sentence represents an unfortunate state of affairs which the Government should urgently examine.

Police morale can be improved. I am pleased that more police officers will be appointed in Norfolk. The Government make great play of the extra numbers, but as my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary pointed out, they have let the numbers fall. We are considering 100 extra police officers in Norfolk, but why were

numbers allowed to fall by 50 between 1997 and 2000? Only now are the Government making up for the harm that they did.

If the Government are to fulfil their promises, they must tackle morale in the caring services. I am worried by the fact that the previous Home Secretary was slow-handclapped at the Police Federation conference. I am worried that doctors are tabling motions about contracting out national health service contracts. I am concerned that teachers and university lecturers are threatening industrial action. The Government can promise what they like about the caring services, but they must carry the staff with them.

I shall do all I can to ensure that the Government's promises are fulfilled in my constituency. Making sure that constituents get the best possible deal is the most important task of a Member of Parliament, especially a new Member. I shall be constructive, but extremely critical if the promises are not delivered in the next four years.

6.4 pm

Mr. Mike O'Brien (North Warwickshire): I am speaking from the Back Benches for the first time in seven years, and I have chosen the furthest Back Bench from which to do so. It has been a privilege to serve the Labour party and my constituents in North Warwickshire as a Minister for four years and a shadow Treasury spokesman before that. I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for appointing me; he showed great prescience and wisdom in doing so; I shall not comment on his decision not to reappoint me.

I welcome the new Home Secretary and his team to the Front Bench. My right hon. Friend has a strong record on education and I am sure that he will be a great success in his current position.

The Government are reforming and radical, and I have played a part in some of the reforms. I contributed to constitutional reform, including the Human Rights Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. Those measures made important changes, and I want the Government to continue with a programme of radical reform.

I shall speak about two issues: policing and public-private partnerships. The Gracious Speech was very good, and delivered on many of Labour's pre-election commitments, but I want to mention two measures that are not in the Gracious Speech. First, I wish to say that, like my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), I am broadly content with the direction of Government policy, but I may occasionally want to encourage it to move faster in some directions.

I cannot help expressing disappointment that we did not move faster on licensing reform. I expected a Bill to be announced in the Gracious Speech. I have heard that the policy and the Bill have not been dropped and that they will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Prisons, who is to reply to the debate, can confirm that that is the case. A draft Bill in the next year might help to deal with some of the detailed issues on licensing law, and I hope that it can be provided. Licensing reform should give

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customers more choice, publicans more freedom, the police more power to deal with disorder, and residents a say. It is long overdue.

Mr. Salmond: I want to put it on record that, although it may have been only a small part of his activities as a Home Office Minister, the hon. Gentleman dealt sensibly with the lack of competition in the racing industry. That was deeply appreciated by a range of people, including the new Leader of the House and myself.

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful for that comment.

The amendment tabled by the Liberal Democrats refers to the lack of a Bill on a referendum on the euro. The Government are right not to rush forward with a Bill, although I am pleased that we shall move to ratify the Nice treaty. We need a careful and practical assessment of the economic tests for joining the euro before we introduce a Bill on the referendum. I welcome the recent speech of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, who said that we would make that assessment. I urge the Government to ignore the euro ideologists on both sides of the argument, the siren voices who urge immediate or no entry.

We must beware the Conservative argument on the euro. Ideology has led the Conservatives to defeat in the election and into a policy cul de sac on the euro. The people of North Warwickshire want answers to the basic questions: what does joining the euro mean for their jobs, for interest rates and for economic prospects? That is why the Government are right on the question of referendums on the Nice treaty, to which the Opposition amendment refers, and the euro, to which the Liberal Democrat amendment refers. The Government's position on those issues is right—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman is straying rather wide of the mark. We are of course debating only the amendment tabled by the official Opposition.

Mr. O'Brien: I am aware of that and I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me that indication. I merely wanted to say that I thought that the Government's cautious attitude to including a Bill on such matters in the Gracious Speech was right.

Mr. Salmond: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have heard a speech in the past half hour dealing largely with the Government's failure to introduce such a measure. How on earth can it be wrong for the hon. Gentleman to express the opposite point of view?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have made my ruling.

Mr. O'Brien: I will of course accept your ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and move on. I had wanted to say something about ensuring that we did not repeat the mistakes that the Tories made on the exchange rate mechanism by entering the euro at the wrong time, for the wrong reasons and at the wrong rate, but I have heard your ruling and will move on.

The people in my constituency want the Government to deliver on public services and particularly on schools, the national health service and, importantly, policing. The public want a police force that is able to deal with the crimes that they face in their daily lives. Very often, they are not the crimes of armed robbery or murder, but antisocial and loutish behaviour and the problems of neighbours from hell who make others' lives a misery. Those are the issues with which my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) dealt as Home Secretary, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) will want to continue that agenda.

The public also want more police officers on the beat. They will welcome proposals for police reform. When considering reforming the police, I hope that my right hon. Friend will consider the precise terms of the definition of the operational independence of chief constables, as set out in the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994. Having more police reassures the public that the Government share their instincts and want to cut crime. Few other issues in the Home Office are more important.

We have promised 6,000 extra officers in the current spending round, and police training centres are full, which is good news. The struggle to increase police numbers, however, has been a hard one. The Conservative Government spent more but got fewer police officers. Indeed, during the first two years of the Labour Government, we did much the same. One reason was that the 1994 Act gave operational independence to chief constables and abolished the requirement to maintain establishment levels. In other words, in conjunction with the police authority, chief constables decided how to spend resources.

When chief constables received extra resources, they met their own, perfectly justifiable priorities, such as providing better equipment and training, new police stations and computers and civilian staff to release officers from desk jobs. So it is not a criticism of chief constables to say that they spent their resources in ways other than on extra officers. However, the fact was that police numbers fell and both Conservative and Labour politicians got the blame. The public wanted more police and they did not always get them.

In recent years, the crime fighting fund has been a way round the legal problem of the definition in the 1994 Act of the operational independence of chief constables. Chief constables receive money from that fund only if they increase police numbers. The fund is essentially an artificial construct. What we really need is an amendment of the Act so that chief constables can in all other respects maintain their operational independence in day-to-day policing matters such as the distribution of resources and the deployment of police officers, but so that the public can get the increase in police numbers that they want and politicians can show that they can deliver what they were elected to do.

Let me make it clear that no one wants politicians to interfere in the proper operational matters of the police. I would oppose doing so. However, on numbers, there is a case for either reintroducing an establishment figure or introducing a similar mechanism for each force that enables chief constables to increase or at least maintain the number of officers. In that way, the public can be reassured that police numbers are a priority. I very much

hope that we will be able to increase police numbers beyond the 6,000 proposed in the current spending review. On that issue, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South and I part company.

I should like to make a couple of other brief points. We need to find ways to increase the powers and status of the ordinary police constable on the beat, which have been eroded over the years. We need to ensure that our constituents are empowered to deal with antisocial behaviour, inservility and louts, rather than—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has had his 10 minutes.

6.15 pm

Dr. John Pugh (Southport): It is with some trepidation that I endeavour to make my first contribution in this House. There are two clear reasons why I am a little anxious. The first is the obvious pressure that afflicts those who follow an exalted predecessor. Members will be mindful of the fact that the previous Member of Parliament for Southport, Mr. Ronnie Fearn, will be a hard act to follow. I need no reminding of that.

Members may not be aware, however, that there are some disturbing precedents when it comes to maiden speeches by Southport MPs. In particular, there is the distressing case etched in the minds of Southport parliamentarians of Edward Marshall Hall. As a Conservative Member, he was returned with a narrow majority of 209 votes, and it is almost exactly 100 years ago to the day that he made his maiden speech in this Chamber.

Mr. Hall chose the subject not of licensing changes but of temperance reform, which was a significant political issue in 1901. He spoke particularly of the then endemic problem of under-age children and youths being sent to public houses to fetch ale for their fathers. It is perhaps a mixed indicator of social and moral change that children no longer enter pubs on their fathers' behalf or even with their fathers' knowledge or permission. If they do so, they are motivated no longer by filial duty but by a desire for personal consumption. In his maiden speech, Mr. Hall chose to address the House on the evil of children transporting liquor from pub to home.

The Tory party in those days was clearly entering a period of policy revision. Belonging to the socially liberal wing of his party, Mr. Hall did not propose harsh penalties, but that beer should be sent around in carts like milk and deposited on the doorstep. It is recorded that his bold and imaginative proposal was greeted with hoots of derision, that he was loth ever to speak again and that he felt that his talents were never sufficiently recognised.

That awful precedent aside, to follow Mr. Ronnie Fearn is daunting enough. Members will recall that, in his two spells as a Member of Parliament, Mr. Fearn was a model of diligence in his pursuit of constituency affairs and a resolute champion of Southport and its people at Westminster.

Anyone who, like me, has canvassed the streets of Southport will observe that it is rare to go down any street and fail to find someone who has been directly helped by Ronnie. Indeed, it is rare in some parts of Southport to go down a street and fail to find someone who is related to Ronnie or has been at school with him. He was born, schooled and employed in the town, was a councillor there

for nearly 40 years and was awarded an OBE for services to the town. Ronnie has been everything a constituency MP should be. He is a legend in his own community.

It has been gratifying but not surprising to learn on arriving at Westminster how well thought of Ronnie is among Back Benchers. I have learned that he is even held in high respect by those responsible for the running and conduct of this great ship of state who have inside knowledge and whom we disdain at our peril: the team of parliamentary attendants and officers.

Ronnie has remained, persistently and consistently, a man of the people. In his case, there was no disconnection between politics and people. Among a sea of grey suits, Ronnie was a character. Few, perhaps none, in this Chamber would have the sheer nerve and *joie de vivre* regularly to star in pantomime in front of thousands of their constituents. Of course, there are unkind observers who say that that is exactly what we do, and perhaps there are too many parallels between the activities—indeed, many would say that the experience of throwing sweets at an expectant audience and harkening to shouts of “Look behind you!” is the best possible preparation for political life.

Ronnie will continue to serve Parliament as a peer—a not inappropriate outcome, given that he played a significant role in securing heritage lottery funds for the restoration of Southport pier. Those unfamiliar with that great landmark should set aside any preconceptions that they have about piers: it is far longer than one can imagine, but despite that—and such is the measure of the Southport sands—it fails to reach the sea except at high tide. The pier restoration is only one small manifestation of the on-going renaissance of Southport—a process that not unnaturally coincides with Liberal Democrat leadership of the council.

That has not passed unnoticed in the House. A quality tourist and retail venue, Southport has had an increased influx of visitors in recent months. Those visitors have included the right hon. Members for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdicombe) and for Devizes (Mr. Ancram)—in fact most probable and improbable candidates for the Tory leadership. I trust that they enjoyed their stay.

It would be foolish of me to pretend that all is well in my part of the world, however. There are deep misgivings about the state of public services, and especially about the way in which they are delivered. The local police force has lost 500 police as a result of the systematic planned Home Office reduction endorsed by both previous Governments: the real effect has been real delays in police response and availability. That has been coupled with—dare I say, “masked by”?—a dazzling range of initiatives: partnerships have mushroomed; there has been a constant chorus of consultation; and police have been taught to talk like insurance salesmen. However, nothing can disguise the simple fact that we want more policemen. It is the result of decisions and actions of the House and the Government that we have not got them so far.

What we have instead is the endless reconfiguration of public services, and the continuous and futile attempts to remodel public services on private enterprise—a vice endemic to both previous Governments. When people phone the local police in Southport, it does no good to find that piped music is played as they wait for their query to be

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dealt with. When people dial 999, it does no good being told helpfully that they are queueing in a call-waiting system. That sort of thing might work for retailers, but it does not work when there is an intruder in the house.

My conclusion is simple. In Southport and elsewhere, public services have been the focus of the election. The issues surrounding the way in which they should be fairly resourced are clear. However, the battles ahead will have more to do with the way in which they are to be delivered. Two parties in the House appear to be persuaded, either wholly or in part, that only in so far as public service is modelled on or involves the private sector can it deliver. The premise is that public services cannot be delivered effectively by public servants. That is a counsel of despair and is recognised as such. One party represented in the Chamber sees a clear difference between public service delivery and selling soap. On behalf of the citizens of Southport, I respectfully submit that the time is now overdue to state the ancient but unhappily no longer orthodox view that public services are best delivered by those whose personal destiny lies with rendering public benefits, not private profits.

The concept of public services pursuing publicly agreed objectives, run by public servants and accountable to nationally or locally elected bodies is clearly one with which the current Government have difficulty. It is of grave concern to people in the north, especially in Southport, that not only is the Government's confidence in public servants in question, but they have seriously weakened the link between the delivery of services and democratically elected bodies. There is a link between our public service problem and the democratic deficit. If the people who truly control public services are increasingly quango placemen, assorted partnerships, shareholders in private companies and the glitterati of Whitehall, what can a vote in a ballot box do?

There is a connection between the disquiet about public services and the disquiet about the workings of our democracy. The House's timidity about constitutional reform has produced regional agencies where there should be regional autonomy, a confusing plethora of partnerships, the marginalisation of local councillors and the sidelining of this Chamber—in a nutshell, the general decay of democratic accountability. Can it not be said that the proper, if not the best way to restore confidence in public service is to restore democratic accountability? That is the message from Southport.

6.25 pm

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Clydesdale): I congratulate you on your re-election to Parliament, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is nice to see you in your usual place.

I welcome all the new Members on both sides of the Chamber to the House of Commons. I am sure that they will enjoy their stay and the work that they do on behalf of their constituents. The first speech in this debate from a Back Bencher—made two hours after the debate began—was made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), who told the House that it had been 22 years and a Queen's Speech since he had made his maiden speech. He was followed by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), who said that he had made his maiden speech 18 years ago.

I shall follow their lead and say that it is 14 years and a Queen's Speech since I made my maiden speech. The three of us have in common our sympathy with and admiration for all Members who come here to make their maiden speech.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh) on his maiden speech. I am sure that his family and constituents will be proud of him. He will enjoy his time in the House of Commons and he will make some alliances across the political divide. I am sure that he will be surprised by some of his experiences here, but they will not impair his enjoyment.

Focusing on constitutional issues, I want to comment on the turnout in the recent general election. None of us can be comfortable with such a drop in turnout. Only a few months prior to the election, I introduced in the House a modest ten-minute Bill called the Rewarding Democracy Commission Bill. I argued in favour of granting incentives to increase public participation in the democratic process. However, the Tory party issued a three-line Whip in respect of my ten-minute Bill—a move unheard of in my time here—and voted it down. All I did was propose establishing a commission to consider how to reward people for participating in democracy. We must think of ways in which to improve our people's participation in their own democracy, but let me put down a marker tonight: whatever the solution to the problem of turnout, the status quo is not an option.

My next topic is devolution. The Scottish Parliament is about to celebrate its second year in existence. Like all new democracies, it had its teething troubles while it settled down, but I was confident that Parliament and the Government were doing the right thing when we passed the legislation to give Scotland its own Parliament, and I remain as confident today. Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Gainsborough is not present to hear my comments on the West Lothian question. I have never had any problems with that question, just as he and his colleagues never had any problems when voting to impose the poll tax on Scotland, or voting on Scottish legislation.

The real answer to the West Lothian question is to embrace the new democracy that devolution offers the United Kingdom. We must think about how we can decentralise government to the regions—a process for which I suspect that there will be cross-party support. I hope that the Government continue to develop their ideas on constitutional reform and ways in which we can improve our democracy. I assure those in the English regions who argue for their own assemblies that they will find a sympathetic ear and support on my part.

I am delighted that there will be a Bill to ratify the Nice treaty. I was in this place in 1992 when we debated the Maastricht treaty. It will be amusing for us to observe the Conservative party ripping itself apart yet again. It was a wonderful sight to behold. The Tories were then in government, and I remember the night when we beat them on a vote. The then Prime Minister had to whip all his Eurosceptic right hon. and hon. Friends into line from the Dispatch Box; he threatened them with a general election. The next day, they all said dutifully that Europe was a good idea if it stopped them from getting the sack. A few of those Members are no longer in this place. I suspect that unless there is some rethinking in the Opposition on how we embrace the European Union and involve ourselves in it, Conservative numbers in the House will continue to decrease.

I am sorry that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is no longer in his place. However, I am sure that he will receive a report of my contribution to the debate on the need for scrutiny. I was fortunate to be the Chairman of the Select Committee on European Scrutiny in the previous Parliament and of the Select Committee on European Legislation in the Parliament before that.

I say to Ministers and to the Government—I hope that we are beginning to be listened to—that scrutiny is extremely important. Those of us who scrutinise European legislation and all those who are members of departmental Select Committees are serving Parliament. They do not take on that role as enemies of Ministers. If the process is used properly, good scrutiny aids government. I hope that the quality of the scrutiny of European legislation enables us to tell Ministers what is happening in their Departments, because all too often they are unaware of that. That is the value of scrutiny. I hope that we shall consider further reforms of that process. It is not a matter of giving power to Select Committees with which to bind the Government. Power should be given to Parliament to scrutinise how we deliver to the people in the communities that we represent. That is not only in Parliament's interests or those of communities, it is in the interests of the Government of the day as well. The collective need should be recognised.

There were some significant reforms in the scrutiny of European legislation in the previous Parliament. The Scrutiny Committee has considerably more powers than previously. I can remember arguing the case for five such Committees. Those who were Members during the previous Parliament will remember the argument and will be aware that we ended up with three Committees instead of two. The case for five was the right one, and I do not say that as a means of saying, "I told you so." I hope that the new Leader of the House and this Parliament will consider how we engage Parliament in scrutinising European Union issues.

We should have five Committees so that more Members are involved in the scrutiny process. On that basis, we would be serving Parliament—we are honoured to be Members of it—our communities and democracy.

I, too, am more than comfortable with the Gracious Speech. However, there will be areas of policy where we shall have to examine matters carefully, scrutinise, discuss and investigate if we are to arrive at best practice—if that is not to use buzzwords—in terms of how we deliver services and democracy inside and outside the House. I am delighted to support the Gracious Speech. I hope that my small contribution on scrutiny will be considered when we come to talk about improving procedures.

6.34 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): First, I shall comment on the excellent speech of the hon. Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh). As all Members do when making a maiden speech, he talked about his constituency and his predecessors in the first part of his speech. It is right and proper to do so. I was interested particularly in the second part of the hon. Gentleman's speech, which touched on what I think should be the main issue for debate today. He referred to the phrase in the Opposition amendment about the

"democratic accountability of Her Majesty's Government and its servants"

and considered whether that sentiment is compatible with the privatisation of public services. The second part of the hon. Gentleman's speech was hugely impressive. It augurs well for his future contributions in this place. I do not know whether I shall do him a service or a disservice when I say that I will apply his approach to my brief remarks.

There is an interesting part of the Tory amendment about participation rates in national elections. Participation rates seem not to be extending to the Tory Benches.

In the election campaign, I think that the Prime Minister had one tremendous stroke of luck. On the day when he was berated by a distressed lady outside a hospital in Edgbaston, the Deputy Prime Minister decided to pursue his dialogue with the public in an altogether more vigorous fashion. That was an amazing stroke of luck because it pushed the hospital confrontation from the top of the news in every bulletin to item three, four or five.

Although the action of the Deputy Prime Minister was top of the news, I can report from my constituency that, rightly or wrongly—although I do not believe that he is constitutionally entitled to punch members of the public—there was sympathy for the quality of his left jab, whereas there was no sympathy for the Prime Minister's handling of a clearly upset lady whose partner was in a cancer ward.

It was a stroke of luck. I do not think that even new Labour could have planned the synchronisation of the two events. The episode involving the Prime Minister would have been intensely damaging to the Government's position if it had received the prominence that would have been given to it if it were not for the activities of the Deputy Prime Minister.

The issue of whether it is possible to have accountable public services touches at the heart of what is going on in the House. We had almost a pantomime today. It was almost a surreal experience. The Prime Minister accused the Leader of the Opposition of planning the privatisation of the health service. We all know that the Prime Minister is planning to privatise key areas of it. *[Interruption.]* Of course he is. Did not Labour Members read the coded language of the Prime Minister's speeches during the election campaign? Did not they notice in the Gracious Speech that we shall have school sponsorship? What sort of school sponsorship will we have? Will we have McDonald's grammar schools to teach pupils about healthy eating? Will we have Coca-Cola grammar schools to teach pupils about healthy drinking? If one of the leadership candidates in the Conservative party is successful, perhaps he will support the Government in having Imperial Tobacco sponsoring schools throughout the country.

If the private sector takes on responsibility for not merely the provision of private finance, a policy which was started by the Conservatives and continued by new Labour for a substantial period, but the running of key parts of public services, where lies the accountability that is spoken about in the Opposition's amendment in terms of the public sector and public servants?

The irony of the amendment is to say that the Gracious Speech puts forward no proposals to increase public accountability, when the Conservatives were the forerunners of the very policy that the Prime Minister seems to want enthusiastically to pursue. I used to earn a

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bare crust as the economist to the Royal Bank of Scotland. I have therefore worked in the private sector, unlike the Prime Minister or the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who—unless being a barrister or television pundit counts—have never done so. I can report that my former colleagues in the Royal Bank of Scotland and, indeed, in every other financial institution are enthusiastic about the private finance initiative because it has made them a great deal of money. We should not complain about that, because the role of private companies is to make profits and create jobs. The fault does not lie with the banks, financial institutions and contractors, but with those who are meant to defend and protect the public interest, but do not have the common sense and judgment to appreciate that we are not getting value for money from the pursuit of private finance in our great public services.

If I had time, I could go through the excellent work done by Allyson Pollock, for example, and the analysis of a range of PFI projects, such as the Edinburgh Royal infirmary, which give the clearest indication yet that they represent much worse value for money for the public sector than alternative means of raising finance. They make clear the implications for jobs, pay, and services within the health service and, increasingly, within the education service of taking on PFI commitments. As someone who has worked in the private sector—and I yield to no one in my admiration for entrepreneurship and people creating jobs—surely, in relation to public accountability, we can see a clear demarcation between what should happen in the competitive economy and what should happen in public services.

I read closely the article in *The Observer* on Sunday by the former deputy leader of the Labour party who, during his active political career, was regarded as being well on the right of the party. He expressed anguish that, as a social democrat—an honourable political philosophy to pursue—he now found himself on the extreme left of new Labour on a range of public policy issues. The article may have been motivated by a range of things, but it was correct in one aspect: its argument that the Prime Minister seemed to be ideologically adrift, with no reference points about what should, or should not be done as far as the public sector and public accountability are concerned.

Having listened to an exchange earlier today—and Labour Members had better cotton on to this—I believe that the Prime Minister is mesmerised by what he thinks is the efficacy of private management and private finance in our great public services. However, the people have a different judgment. The Prime Minister is back with a tremendous majority, not because of that policy, but because of the lack of a serious alternative from the Opposition to what he was hinting at in the election campaign and what he wants to pursue in public policy, as outlined in the Gracious Speech.

I remember the interview that the Prime Minister gave on "Breakfast with Frost" in which he said that it would be a good idea if funding of the health service moved up to the European standard. If we are going to meet that standard, we will have to increase funding to 9.1 per cent. of gross domestic product. However, the gap between us and European provision is not about private finance; throughout the UK, private health service provision is about 1 per cent., as it is across the continent. The gap is about the lack of public provision.

On Monday night, I participated in a debate with the Mayor of London. A GP from London pointed out that the bed occupancy rate in the London health service is 99 per cent. In such a situation, there is no slack or room for manoeuvre; there is no ability to do anything to respond, not just to emergencies or winter crises, but any situation. Would it not be a really useful idea to invest in our public services without serving the god or at the altar of privatisation? Would it not be a good idea if we tried to see what we can do with public services and public accountability if we provide funds? Would that not increase the public's faith in politics and increase their participation in our democracy?

6.44 pm

Mr. Tom Harris (Glasgow, Cathcart): I am grateful for the opportunity to address the House for the first time since my election. I hope that hon. Members will display their customary patience and indulgence on such occasions. A former Speaker of this House, J. W. Lowther, said in 1919 that there were three golden rules for parliamentary speakers:

"Stand up. Speak up. Shut up."

I will try to bear them in mind.

In the tradition of maiden speeches, first, I pay tribute to my predecessor, John Maxton, who was clearly held in great affection and esteem by his colleagues on both sides of the House, as well as by his constituents. He was an assiduous, hard-working Member who served his constituency and his party's Front Bench with deep commitment. I am convinced that, had the Labour Party won the 1992 general election, John Maxton would have been invited to serve in government, a chance that he would have richly deserved, but was denied only through bad timing.

John Maxton was renowned in the Labour party for two reasons. First, he could claim impressive lineage as the nephew of the famous Independent Labour party MP, the red Clydesider, Jimmy Maxton. Secondly, he became something of a Labour hero in 1979, when he unexpectedly won Glasgow, Cathcart from the sitting Member, the then shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, now the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor). It is perhaps unusual for a Member's predecessor to have retired after 22 years' service, yet for his predecessor's predecessor still to be a Member. Even now, many of my constituents still speak fondly of the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East, and I hope that, one day, I can match the affection with which he is still regarded in Glasgow, Cathcart.

Cathcart is one of nine Glasgow constituencies. Geographically, it is the largest in the city, stretching from Carnwadric and Kennishead in the west, to Castlemilk in the south and east; from Mount Florida and Crosshill in the north to Muirend in the south. Castlemilk itself, once a byword for deprivation, with a population equivalent to the Scottish city of Perth, now has a fraction of its original population. Castlemilk has changed out of all recognition over recent years and, importantly, the emigration from Castlemilk to other parts of the city is, at last, starting to be reversed. Of course, like any other housing estate in the country, Castlemilk does not have its problems to seek. In particular, drugs misuse has scarred the lives of thousands of families in my constituency, and I am delighted that the Government have given notice to those who profit illegally from others' misery that their evil trade will no longer be tolerated.

Scots, and Glaswegians in particular, have a great resilient spirit, matched only by their sense of humour. There is nothing quite like a close encounter with a member of one's electorate to eradicate any sense of self-importance in a candidate. In the general election campaign, I was canvassing in Castlemilk drive one Sunday afternoon. I introduced myself to one elderly voter as the Labour candidate and asked, "Can I ask how you intend to vote on Thursday?". She replied, "Oh, I'm just going to go round the corner to the primary school as usual, son."

I am conscious of the convention that maiden speeches should avoid any controversial subjects; the last thing that I would seek is a reprimand from you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for contravening any House rule. I doubt if I could respond to such a reprimand with the flair and humour shown, for example, by Benjamin Disraeli, who was once criticised by the Speaker for declaring,

"Half the Cabinet are asses."

He later apologised and said:

"Mr Speaker, I withdraw. Half the Cabinet are not asses."

I hope that I can be allowed to say a few words, not so much about the Gracious Speech as about what was not in it. A great deal has been spoken and written in the past few weeks—and much has been said in the House this afternoon—about how we can encourage voters back into the polling booths. Some claim that a change in the electoral system for the House would increase participation at elections, but my experience has not borne that out. The first ever Scottish parliamentary elections in 1999 were held using the additional member system. Only 60 per cent. of voters in Scotland took part—more than 10 per cent. fewer than at the general election two years previously. In June 1999, fewer than 30 per cent of voters took part in the European parliamentary elections, which were held under the closed list system.

Now there are some who want a fourth, altogether different system for electing Members to the House, called AV-plus. Apart from the dangers of creating a two-tier House of Commons, with MPs of different status, and apart from the confusion that inevitably arises whenever a new voting system is introduced, we have to consider another more damaging consequence of changing the existing system. If Governments in future are cobbled together by politicians behind closed doors instead of being elected by voters at the ballot box, how can we expect people to come out and vote? My fear is that a few years after the new system was introduced, we would look back with longing and envy at the turnout of 2001. So may I take this opportunity to express the hope that a similar omission will be made from the Gracious Speech for many years to come?

It appears that I am setting out on my parliamentary career at a time when the public perception of Parliament and politicians of all parties is at an all-time low. We are told by political commentators that politicians are held in far less esteem by the electorate than was the case 50 years ago. We are also told by the same political commentators that that was one of the reasons for such a low turnout at the general election. There may well be some truth in that, but as a former member of the fourth estate, I suggest that at least some of the blame for the electorate's lack of enthusiasm for politics stems from the media themselves.

Enoch Powell once said that politicians who complain about the media are like ships' captains who complain about the sea. Nevertheless, at the risk of being swept

overboard, let me ask this: during the election, how often did we read in the newspapers, hear on the radio or see on television so-called humorous advice to voters to go on holiday to avoid election coverage, or not to answer the door in case it was a canvasser? In their few attempts to make politics more interesting to a larger number of voters, journalists risk trivialising issues to the point of ridicule.

Now, many members of the public, the media and even this House may well find the Tory leadership campaign to be beyond ridicule, but I am making a genuine cross-party point. When BBC television news can illustrate the leadership election by depicting every prospective candidate as a cartoon pantomime character, it is time to ask whether the media's claim that politicians are no longer respected has not become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We have all arrived at the House by very different routes and with very different qualifications to do the job before us. I hope my own experience and qualifications put me on a higher level than the unfortunate gentleman of whom George Bernard Shaw once wrote:

"He knows nothing and he thinks he knows everything. That points clearly to a political career."

It is an extraordinary privilege to have been elected to this House. I believe that this sovereign Parliament of the United Kingdom remains the best hope for radical change in the lives of the millions of people that we represent. So I finish by expressing the hope that in the next few years I can play some part in helping bring about the changes that we need and I thank the House for its indulgence this evening.

6.52 pm

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Harris) on his excellent maiden speech. He spoke generously about his predecessors, which was appreciated throughout the House; he spoke with humour and he spoke quite movingly about some of the problems of the low turnout. We all listened to his speech and we look forward to hearing much more from him in future. I thank him on behalf of us all.

I congratulate the Home Secretary on his appointment and welcome his new ministerial team. It is good to see them all in their places. I declare, as always, an interest, as I must in these debates, as a recorder of the Crown court, a former acting metropolitan stipendiary magistrate and now a deputy district judge in the magistrates courts in London. I should like to say something about the criminal courts this evening.

Mr. Banks: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has time to be here.

Mr. Malins: I missed the hon. Gentleman's intervention, but I bet that it was so good that it would probably have incurred him six months if he had appeared before me, which in the current situation would have had him out in six weeks—and not a moment too soon.

If I may offer the Government a word of advice, it is that they should not legislate too much. The criminal justice system has been subject to a plethora of legislation for the past 15 or 20 years. I remember the Conservative party starting it. When I was first elected in 1983 we

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seemed to have a Criminal Justice Act or two every year. Perhaps it is time to reflect for a moment on what we have done and to see whether we have got it right or wrong.

In a few moments, I shall turn to a couple of matters that we need to correct, but first let me say a word about prisons. Members on both sides of the House share a concern about the state of our prisons. It is not a party political issue. Members everywhere are ashamed of what goes on in our prisons. There are good ones, and Sir David Ramsbotham, who was an excellent chief inspector of prisons, pointed out the good prisons—the ones with a good work regime and good morale—but, my goodness, there are some bad ones.

I was most depressed by my last visit to Feltham young offenders institute, and I advise all hon. Members to go and see it. The institute is in two wings—A wing and B wing—one of which is for under-18s. A lot of money is spent on the under-18s, who have a constructive time. There is plenty of education, work and sport and morale is not too bad, but for the over-18s it is simply dreadful. Would any of us want to see young men of 19 locked up for 18 hours a day? The situation is absolutely hopeless. Any of us in that position would come out bitter and twisted—much worse than when we went in. Is there any team sport for the 18 and 19-year-olds? There is hardly any. There is very little education or preparation for the outside. That is the fault of Governments over the years. Perhaps the problem is money, but it depresses me as a judge and as a member of the Home Affairs Committee to go to Feltham and to see a real problem—to see young men for whom I am very sorry indeed. I hope that that does not sound soft. I mean that I am very sorry indeed that there they have absolutely zero chance of making any progress when they come out. It is an absolute tragedy. Let us all co-operate in trying to address it.

I was really pleased to hear the Home Secretary say that he would try to involve hon. Members on both sides of the House in sensible discussions about the way forward in the criminal justice system. I have had enough of yah-boo politics. I have experienced it for too long and I am not very good at it. I should like instead to have some serious chats with people who know the subject and I welcome what the Home Secretary said in that respect.

I am not sure whether we need wholesale changes in our criminal justice system. I would rather look at the current system and see where we can make some improvements. I am about to set out a technical problem. I would be tempted to ask hon. Members to put their hands up if they were aware of it, but I know that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would rule me out of order if I did so. It concerns the youth courts and it is addressed to those who might be advising the Government. It is a real problem in the courts where I sit, and I sit from Camberwell to Greenwich, Woolwich, Horseferry road, Bow street and Highbury corner. It concerns 12 to 14-year olds and the question of custody in the youth courts.

A persistent offender aged 12 to 14 can be given up to two years' custody by the youth courts. A non-persistent offender cannot be given a custodial sentence, so what happens? If two young boys appear charged with a fairly serious offence and one is a persistent offender, he can be given two years' custody, but what about his mate, who is of good character? The youth court is unable to pass a custodial sentence. If it considers that custody is even a

possibility, it has to send that young man to be dealt with by the Crown court, which creates enormous upset. Crown court judges are saying, "What on earth is going on? We are getting all these young men aged 14 being sent to the Crown court. That is stupid. Why on earth can't the youth court have the same powers in respect of those who were previously of good character as it has with persistent offenders?" It would be a small amendment to make, but it is a problem that worries district judges right across London. It is something that the Government need to put right.

There is another little matter that we could put right. Currently, there is what is known as a section 51 transfer. A defendant appears before the magistrates court and on an indictable-only offence does not get committed for trial, which takes weeks, but is transferred straight to the Crown court. That it straightforward when it relates to adults who are transferred straight to the Crown court and it is over in a flash, but no such power exists for youths. Why not? The provision could be tagged on to a Bill currently going through Parliament.

We are all worried about the Crown Prosecution Service. Is it underfunded? What is wrong? Is there a morale problem? Those of us who appear in court regularly see day after day the CPS apparently in some difficulty, to put it mildly, with its files, which cannot be found.

Defendants who have appeared before me at Camberwell Green magistrates court have elected for a committal to a Crown court, but the CPS representatives were told by their bosses to ask for a six-week remand before committal, or a four-week remand if the defendant was in custody. It takes about half an hour to prepare the papers for a committal, although it can take two days if it is a difficult case, but it does not take six weeks. Someone somewhere has to drive the CPS into being able to commit cases to the Crown court much faster than it has hitherto.

There is something in magistrates courts called the criminal justice unit—a group of people whom we never see. It is a type of liaison between the Crown prosecutor and police. Time after time, however, cases are adjourned because witnesses have not turned up and it turns out that the criminal justice unit had done nothing about warning them. There are inefficiencies in the system, and much has to be put right. However, we do not need a fundamental reform of the entire system.

I am slightly in favour of some reform of the double jeopardy rule. I think that there is a good argument for it in cases where a life sentence could be passed. However, I am worried about the proposals on jury trial, which I think will encounter a pretty tough fight in the House.

If we have a rule that simply says, "If magistrates think that their powers of punishment are enough, there will be no jury trial", it would exclude the possibility of magistrates having any discretion to permit the defendant, who may be of previous good character, to elect Crown court trial. We have heard about abuse of the system by which people elect Crown court trial, but such abuse is disappearing. Nowadays, there is something called plea before venue, and there are other means of keeping the process short. Other developments in magistrates courts are improving efficiency, notably plea before venue. I therefore advise Ministers to be very careful with their proposals on jury trial and to talk to the whole House about them.

My final comments are on the great, big issue of the day—drugs. Young men of 17 to 25 appear before me who are heroin addicts. Their lives are ruined and it is absolutely tragic. They burgle houses to get the goods, and they sell the goods to buy the heroin. I agree that we need a royal commission on drugs, a sensible chat about which drugs we should or should not legalise and what to do about heroin. For example, there is now a drug, Naltrexone, which has been tested in America and which helps to block out the need for heroin. Cocaine is a problem, but heroin is the biggest problem facing young people today. Please, let the House spend four years trying to sort out the serious issue of the effect of drugs on young people in the criminal justice system.

7.2 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I listened with interest to the comments of the hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) on Feltham young offenders institute, which is not far from my constituency and I have visited. I share his concern about conditions there. I also join him in praising my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Harris) for his excellent maiden speech. My hon. Friend paid proper tribute to the excellent John Maxton, and his constituents can be truly proud of his first speech in this place. I should also acknowledge the very strong maiden speech of the hon. Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh).

I share the view of those who have said that modernisation of our public services, particularly, our criminal justice system, is the crucial challenge facing the House in the next four years. The environmental challenge, however, will take more than four years to resolve. We have to determine how best to reduce our carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions.

Maintaining a strong economy is a central factor in addressing both those issues. Our strong economy, and strong memories of crime doubling under the previous Conservative Government—who promised an extra 5,000 police officers in 1992, whereas the police establishment had been reduced by 1,500 officers by 1997—were powerful factors in my own and my hon. Friends' re-election to the House.

The general election campaign also clarified the electorate's endorsement of the Government's view that the fruits of a strong economy should be invested in our public services. The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) did the United Kingdom a service by revealing Conservative Members' deep antipathy to sustained high investment in our public services: just imagine the implications of a £20 billion public spending cut for our police forces and for the regeneration funding that is necessary for community renewal.

The way in which reform is achieved and extra money is used in our public services are crucial issues. I have no ideological problem with enhanced use of the private sector. The credit card industry, for example, was sensibly involved in tackling credit card fraud, and the private finance initiative has delivered hospitals. We have to examine each case on its merits. I feel some frustration, however, about the way in which the debate on private sector involvement in our public services is being conducted. We have to move on from the very narrow private sector versus public sector debate. If we can do that, it will help us to deal with the concerns of some of those who did not vote in the general election.

We should examine the role of the third sector in our economy and consider how to extend the role of schemes such as neighbourhood watch and victim support. Those key third-sector organisations are rooted in the community and play a vital role in helping to prevent crime and in supporting the victims of crime. Co-operatives and other mutual organisations, social enterprises and not-for-profit bodies could have a new role in tackling some of the problems facing both our public services and other services on which the public rely. *Harmoni*, in my own constituency, is a general practitioners co-operative that has transformed not only the provision of out-of-hours GP care but the terms of service for the GPs participating in the co-operative.

In the private sector, the financial services industry is filling big gaps in efforts to tackle financial exclusion, with credit unions and building societies providing many of the cheapest loans available. I hope that we shall see further measures to extend the role of credit unions and building societies.

Perhaps we should consider a mutual model for Railtrack. In addition to considering whether to renationalise it or maintain it as a purely private company, surely it is worth debating the option of applying a not-for-profit or business mutual model to that organisation. We could consider applying mutual models in the water industry, too, as a means of remedying serious underinvestment and a lack of consumer input and control in the sector.

In debating our public services, particularly our criminal justice system, we have to consider not only structure but how to improve the quality of leadership. I think that, with the extra resources that the Government are making available, the police reform Bill will help police in my constituency to develop much more flexible and effective services, to respond more quickly to the concerns of local people. Nationally, we have to find a much better way of celebrating and rewarding best practice in police forces and other parts of the public services. We also have to examine ways of enabling leaders to develop their talents and consider how best to retain our police officers.

We definitely have to ensure that there is a much more sensitive, partnership-style approach to national monitoring and inspection regimes by bodies such as the Office for Standards in Education and the Audit Commission. Those regimes should, however, remain just as rigorous. We also have to consider how to maintain the flow of staff between our public services and private and third-sector bodies.

In the general election campaign, the quality of the health service and the fear of crime were two of the most important issues in my constituency. I hope that we shall see much more investment in Northwick Park hospital, which is the key acute hospital in my constituency. The NHS reform Bill will be a key factor in giving GPs a greater say and greater clout in the local health care economy. I hope that such measures will enable us to modernise intermediate care services, such as those that are potentially on offer at Northwood and Pinner community hospital.

[Mr. Gareth R. Thomas]

We also need much more investment in social services if we are to tackle some of the causes of crime. The image of Harrow—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's speech is drifting somewhat. He ought to come back to the terms of the amendment.

Mr. Thomas: The one key concern flagged up by the amendment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the falling participation rate in our national elections. One of the ways to tackle the drop in numbers of those voting in my constituency and the wider borough of Harrow will be to provide additional resources to tackle some of the problems in Harrow. There is real social need alongside great wealth in the area, and I hope to see changes in the local government funding formula to reflect that.

I welcome the Bills on police reform and the proceeds of crime, not least because, over the next 12 months, they will help to tackle a key challenge for the Metropolitan police—violent crime. The experience of crime and the fear of violent crime in particular have a deeply pernicious influence on people's lives and their ability to participate in the community. A new drive to take on the organised criminals behind much of London's violent crime—aided by the criminal asset recovery agency, for example—is essential.

I look forward to the Halliday and Auld reports being published and I hope that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's announcement of a standards unit will enable a proper inspection of crime and disorder partnerships. The very best of these work effectively in bringing together all statutory and voluntary agencies in the fight against crime, but some partnerships do need proper scrutiny by such a unit to make sure that "partnership" is a reality, and is not just talked about.

Another key issue that would help to drive up participation rates in our elections will be tackling some of this country's environmental issues. I am pro-nuclear, but considerable investment in renewable energy over the next four years is essential if we are to tackle the immediate problem of lowering our greenhouse gas emissions.

I welcome the Queen's Speech and the measures to improve our criminal justice system, but I hope that Ministers will not lose sight of the environmental challenge.

7.12 pm

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster): It is with a great sense of honour that I rise to speak in this House for the first time today. I know that at least 658 people will disagree with my contention that the Cities of London and Westminster is the most prestigious constituency in the United Kingdom, but it is probably fair to say that it is where so many of the great matters of our history have taken place.

I was born in Germany and brought up in the home counties. I first came to Westminster and central London when I was about seven years old. I remember the excitement of seeing Buckingham Palace, St. Paul's Cathedral and all the other great landmarks in my

constituency. Little did I realise that, less than three decades later, I would be lucky enough to represent this constituency.

It was a particular joy for me to learn that I am the third-youngest Member of Parliament for the City of London part of my constituency in the past 160 years. I realise that I have a hard task before me, not least as I must follow Peter Brooke, who was Member of Parliament for my constituency for the past quarter of a century. As the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) said earlier, he will go now to the House of Lords. He has been a great help to me in the 18 months since my selection as a candidate. He has been a great servant not only to my party, but to the country at large.

As many hon. Members know, Peter Brooke has an erudite manner, which will be sadly missed and which, I am afraid, will not be entirely replicated by myself in this House in the years ahead. He had two obsessive interests; election statistics and cricket. When he used to talk wistfully about what it was like in the Rawalpindi in 1935, one never knew whether he was referring to some arcane test match trivia or some local election statistics. He will be sadly missed and I only hope that I will be able to follow in his footsteps as best I can.

One of the difficulties of representing Westminster is that a great number of fellow Members live within my constituency. I was made aware of that only yesterday in the Lobby when I was harangued by two colleagues, complaining, respectively, about traffic calming and the strictly enforced parking regulations in this part of London. I should point out that I have never been a councillor in the City of Westminster. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Djanogly) was a councillor here until April and he is the person to whom Members should put all their complaints in future.

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East): Passing the buck already.

Mr. Field: Absolutely.

All of us who come to this House have different backgrounds and—with your indulgence, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I should like to say a little about mine and about why I wanted to enter public life. My mother was born in the early months of the last world war in 1939 in a little village outside a large town called Breslau—now called Wrocław—which subsequently became part of Poland. My grandfather, whom I barely knew—I was about three when he passed away—was born exactly 100 years ago. He grew up in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany, at a time when politics was very much looked down upon by the ruling class. He was from a well-to-do Silesian family and became a doctor.

My grandfather regretted to his dying day that he had rather looked down on politics, as had many others of his generation, as that was the vacuum that, along with the discredited Weimar republic and the great economic crisis in Germany in the 1920s, let in, to a large extent, national socialism. People say to me that politics does not matter very much, but, like many here, I am concerned that there is a sense of apathy. Many hon. Members would confirm from their experience of recent weeks and months that there is antipathy from many members of the electorate. We must do our best to re-engage them.

My mother was twice a refugee by the age of 15, fleeing first from Breslau to Leipzig and then, finally, from east to west Berlin before the days of the Berlin wall. It was instilled in me from a young age that politics is far too important to be left to someone else. I am a great believer in the words of Edmund Burke, a great Tory philosopher, who said that for evil to prevail requires no more than for good men to do nothing.

I wish to refer to the constitutional reforms of recent years. I believe that my party was too timid in the post-1997 era, particularly in relation to what was going on at the other place. The House of Lords reforms were botched and partisan, and we shall see what is to come in the second stage of those reforms. However, my belief is that we have little choice and we cannot turn the clock back. We should perhaps have defended the status quo more robustly than we did. However, and this will be a rare use of these words, I now agree with the Liberal Democrat policy: that we need to move to a fully elected second senate. As will be pointed out, there will be concerns as to how a fully elected House of Lords will intermesh with an elected House of Commons, and we shall have to face those concerns because of the ill-thought-out constitutional reforms.

My great political hero is Andrew Bonar Law, who entered this place at the first general election of the last century. It is a salutary lesson that he entered this House with two things in mind: one was the preservation of the empire—he was Canadian; and the other was that Ireland should remain united. By the time he became Prime Minister in 1922, the pass had been lost on both of those main issues, in a sense. That may be a salutary lesson for many Conservative Members who have entered the House as Eurosceptics with strong feelings about the importance of our nation. I am concerned that, in the years ahead, events may move in a direction that we do not, at least at this juncture, consider favourable.

I also wish to look at, dare I say it, Scottish devolution. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) is not here because I suspect that what I am about to say will warm the cockles of his heart. Conservative Members have perhaps made too much of the idea of English votes for English laws, when the issue should be about Scottish taxes for Scottish expenditure. By dint of a mere 74-vote majority, my hon. Friend the Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Duncan) is the Conservatives' sole Scottish Member of Parliament. We must face facts: at each of the last two general elections, barely one in six Scottish electors have voted for unionist parties, so we are being taken down the path chosen by the Government.

I am very worried because the Government have upset the equilibrium of the United Kingdom, and it will be difficult to restore. I have a prediction to make, and I hope that I shall be proved wrong. The House must bear it in mind that I am not necessarily the best of forecasters. At the weekend, I told most of my constituency association, or those who wanted to hear, that I did not think that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) would enter the fray for the Tory leadership.

I predict that there will be two distinct power blocs in the Scottish Parliament: on the one hand, the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party; and on the other, the Scottish National party, possibly in bed with the Conservatives, who will no longer be a unionist party in Scotland. That will present a great challenge in the years

ahead. My great concern is that the Government have not really thought through their modernisation agenda and are blind to many of the difficulties that will arise from it. I beseech them to tread carefully in constitutional matters.

I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to address these crucial matters, on which I know I shall have much more to say in the years ahead.

7.22 pm

Mr. Tony Banks (West Ham): It is normal to extend the ritual courtesies to someone who has just made his first speech, and to say that it was thoughtful and a good contribution. In the case of the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field), I can say that without any exaggeration. He made an awesome speech, and did so as a new Member with far more assurance than I can manage after 18 years in this place. I noticed his lack of notes and his eloquence on the matters that he wanted to address.

The hon. Gentleman comes from a fascinating background, and I look forward to more contributions from him. He told us that his family came from Germany; indeed, so did our royal family. He also talked about Bonar Law—a strange hero, if I may say so—who was Canadian. We might consider that when we talk about immigration. Probably all of us have predecessors who came here from elsewhere. We should bear in mind the contribution that many eminent people have made to this country over the years. I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House. He replaces a very erudite, civilised and cultured Member of Parliament in the right hon. Peter Brooke, and I am sure that he has nothing to fear about his ability to stand comparison with Sir Peter, who was much admired by everyone in the House.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Harris), who unfortunately is not here, on his speech. He, too, follows in the footsteps of an assiduous, popular Member of Parliament, John Maxton. Speaking as chairman of the advisory committee on works of art, I can tell the House that John played an eminent part in our deliberations, and we will miss his contribution. I noticed that my hon. Friend bears a remarkable physical resemblance to John, and I remind him that John was a fairly regular runner in the London marathon, so I hope that my hon. Friend will be able to follow in those sweaty footsteps.

Although he is not here, I must mention the speech of a retread, the hon. Member for North-West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham). When he talks about law and order, I am always fascinated. I have to remind myself, and the House, that one of his ancestors assassinated that very good man and Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, so given the hon. Gentleman's antecedence, I always listen carefully to what he says about law and order.

There is a good lesson tucked away here. Spencer Perceval was doubly unfortunate: he was shot by a constituent who was complaining about the tardy response to a letter. That was bad enough, but the assassin got the wrong Minister. Let that be an object lesson to all new Members: they must be quick in replying to their constituency correspondence and try to avoid at all costs looking like a Minister in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As I said, I have been a Member for 18 years, and I had only just got to the point where I thought that I recognised everyone who entered the House in 1997. Now, in 2001,

[Mr. Tony Banks]

there are more new Members, so I am trying to identify them. I apologise for the fact that there are at least two new Members here whom I do not recognise, but they do look stunningly like people whom I do know. I saw a Liberal Democrat Member who looks like Chris Chataway, and behind him, a Member who is still present who looks remarkably like Lord Lucan. May I say, with great respect to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (John Thurso) that his Lordship is safe here? He has done well to seek the anonymity of being a Liberal Democrat. There is a Tory Back Bencher who looks remarkably like Mr. Bean. He is welcome, and I hope that his time here will be spent well and to the purpose of the House and his constituents.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on his new post. I knew him when he was a local councillor in Sheffield. We worked together in local government, and he has done, rather better than me, of course, but he has also done well for the east end in his capacity as Secretary of State for Education and Employment. I look forward to similar treatment from him for the east end in his new capacity. Having thanked and congratulated everyone, I am running out of time to make my own contribution, but I will, I hope, have opportunities to speak in future.

I was disappointed with the turnout in West Ham—it was below 50 per cent. I might add that Labour still won handsomely, with 70 per cent. of the vote, so we were not too worried about our majority. What worried me was that 17 per cent. of the households in my constituency had not a single registered voter, which either says something about the collection of details by the local authority and the returning officer or it means that an awful number of people in my constituency are not entitled to vote, although many of them manage to make their way to my advice surgery. [Laughter.] Well, it is a serious point.

We check to find out which people are registered, and I spend most of my time dealing with those who are not registered. They might have a good reason for that, but what is the relationship of a Member of Parliament to those people? They cannot even say that I am their MP if they did not vote for me. I was toying for a moment with the idea of seeing only those who are on the electoral register, however they voted, but I felt that it would probably be unfair because many of them are asylum seekers and people who want to settle in this country. In view of what I said earlier, most of them are very welcome; indeed, I hope that they will make a contribution.

One reason for the low turnout is the fact that people are galvanised in an election when they want to vote against something. One rarely runs into demonstrations of people who are, by and large, satisfied with events. I am not being complacent, but I believe that the electorate were prepared to give us, as a party in government, the benefit of the doubt. They saw that we came to power after 18 years of Conservative government, so we have not had enough time to slow the ship down, never mind turn it around. We have these four years to make genuine progress. When the next election comes round, we shall have to demonstrate significant progress and success in the areas where people feel that it is most necessary. If we do that, the new leader of the Conservative party will grow old in opposition, because a Labour Government

will be returned in election after election. If the new leader of the Conservative party turns out to be the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), he will have to be mummified so that he can see out his time as leader. He smokes so many cigarettes that he has probably kippered himself already.

We will be asked about delivery of services such as health, education, law and order, transport, and we cannot be prescriptive about how we will deliver them. We will be judged by results, not by the purity of our approach.

I look forward to the conversion of my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) to the cause of decriminalisation of drugs, which I have advocated in this House for many years. We are not winning the war against drugs. My hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), who is sitting on the Bench in front of me, used to be a Home Office Minister. He used to give what amounted to Government health warnings by saying that decriminalisation was not Government policy, but today I shall do it for him: the decriminalisation of drugs is not Government policy. However, I believe that we must be bold and radical when we consider the matter, and look at the whole range of issues involved.

We are not winning the war against drugs. If it is true that 70 per cent. of all crime is associated with the supply and use of drugs, we ought to be deciding whether criminalisation is appropriate. I believe that it is not.

Reference has been made to the yob culture. I shall not try to pinpoint the blame for its rise over recent years, but it represents a general breakdown in our society. I believe that we should consider a national community service scheme, and I hope to be able to advance that cause by means of a Bill later in this Parliament, so that I can explain more of my thinking on the matter.

The Gracious Speech makes it clear that there will be another free vote on hunting. I hope that this time there will be no attempt to kick a Bill on the subject into the long grass. One cause of the low voter turnout at the election was cynicism. If we promise to do something and then do not do it, it will not be surprising if people become cynical and do not support us. I hope that we shall do what the House has said that it will do many times in the past—institute a ban on hunting. It is time for the Government to act and give hon. Members a chance to introduce such a ban.

7.32 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): I intend to address the House on the question of constitutional issues. Taking up the point made by the hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), I should make it clear that I believe that the most important matter facing the country and Parliament is the restoration of faith in politics.

The constitution is the framework within which we are governed. Given that that framework is becoming increasingly eroded, how does it match up to the requirement that it must permit the British people to make decisions based on true democracy and accountability? That is the key question. For example, I believe that we should reverse the procedural changes that have been introduced to the guillotine procedure. A motion on that subject will be debated tomorrow. The changes will have a major effect on the debates on the Nice treaty.

We must restore the independence of Back-Bench Members. As I have said in two speeches in the past six months, that will require a reduction in the power of the Whips. In my judgment, such a reduction would have to be achieved by amending the Standing Orders. Anyone who cares to look at the two speeches to which I have referred will see that I made mention of what happened in 1886. I shall not go into that now, but that was when the Speaker's rules were transferred to the Executive. From that moment on, Back-Bench Members ceased to have the degree of control that they had enjoyed for centuries.

I believe that there should be more independence for Select Committees. I am glad to have signed the motion circulating among hon. Members with regard to the report from the Select Committee on Liaison. That is a very important indicator of the direction in which the House has to move.

We should examine, and probably remove, the rule that prevents civil servants from being cross-examined by Select Committees about the advice that they have given to Ministers. That is a difficult and delicate area, but the present rule precludes proper discussion about what is really going on.

That problem is deeply related to another important matter—freedom of information. If we want a radical and proper examination of the interaction between voters and our constitution, we are bound to consider such matters and to arrive at conclusions in the very near future.

We should enhance the power of the Comptroller and Auditor General. The selection of the Chairman and members of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges should be taken away from the Executive. By definition, all scrutiny Committees should be chaired by Opposition Members. It is outrageous, for example, that the appointment of the Chairman of the Select Committee on European Scrutiny should be in the hands of the Government. The Committee was established in 1972, but only since the beginning of the previous Parliament has that power of appointment resided with the Executive.

We must also reform the House of Lords by making it a far more elected Chamber, although I do not think that its entire membership needs to be elected. Of course, to prevent competition between the two Houses, the House of Lords' electoral cycle would have to be different from this House's, as would the areas represented. The necessary reform of the House and its procedures must be exciting and relevant, because we must bring them up to date. However, we must also maintain the House's essential democracy and accountability.

My next point concerns matters outside the House. I consider it inconceivable that any leader of the Conservative party—the greatest of parties, which has had the honour to serve this country for the best part of two and a half centuries—should not be clear about who governs this country. Anything else is impossible to imagine, but it is clear from remarks that have been made outside the Chamber, that some people do not understand what is a very simple matter. The question is not whether one is anti-European, but whether one is pro-democracy and pro-accountability.

The problem is clear. After the Irish referendum, Mr. Romano Prodi went to Ireland to lecture people and tell them that they must hold another referendum because the earlier result had been undemocratic. I defy anyone—

in this House or in the country—to advocate allowing ourselves to be governed by such people. However, the truth is that we are already so governed, which is why the European treaties must be renegotiated. That is the only way to get the balance right. I am pro-democracy, and it is pro-European to be pro-democracy. It is anti-European to be anti-democracy. That message must be brought home to the electorate as a whole.

People must be informed properly. The BBC rules on impartiality and on matters of major controversy, and the broadcasting legislation itself, must be examined. We must be sure that the relevant measures are interpreted and used in a way that benefits the people of this country as a whole. We must ensure, in the public interest, that people have a proper and impartial opportunity to acquire the information that they need. It is also important that the right questions be asked, which means that the necessary research processes in the relevant institutions must be enhanced.

I will defend to the death free speech in newspapers or on radio and television. However, that freedom of speech must be based on the requirement that people be given proper and fair information on all matters.

Furthermore, remarks made outside the House in the past 24 hours suggest that the Nice treaty should be allowed to go ahead. I want all the treaty elements covering the European Union looked at properly, because the EU impinges on the rights and privileges of Members of this House, and on the rights of those who vote for us. As I have said before, Parliament is not ours: it belongs to the British people, and hon. Members have no right to hand it over to anyone else.

The natural consequence of the movement towards Europe that might take place under certain permutations of the policies held by those who want to lead the Conservative party is that Britain would not merely be subject to further integration, but would be absorbed into a European constitution. That constitution is in the offing, and I have predicted it for many years.

In this regard, one has to ask certain constitutional questions about the Conservative party. First, let me quote Churchill on the truth. He said that one should tell the truth to the British people, and continued:

"They are a tough people, a robust people. They may be offended at the moment, but if you have told them exactly what is going on you have insured yourself against complaints and protests which are very unpleasant when they come home, on the morrow of some disillusion."—[*Official Report*, 23 November 1932; Vol. 272, c. 87.]

I believe that that is extremely relevant to what is going on in the Conservative party.

The second point concerns what a political party is. In the words of Edmund Burke, a political party is a body of men—and, of course, women—

"united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed".

It is impossible to reconcile the differences on this European issue and prevent the tensions and conflicts that are bound to follow from it if we try to create a false and impossible coalition. It will not work. To that extent, I agree with what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) said in his statement yesterday. The issue needs to be brought out into the open. It is essential that we have a proper debate about the principle that Burke identified.

[Mr. William Cash]

Disraeli said that the Tory party is a national party or it is nothing. That was the statement of one of our greatest Prime Ministers. It was not nationalistic—he meant the democratic nation state. That is the point. It is to do with the democracy and accountability that this constitutional arena—this House of Commons—represents. It needs improvement and reform, but that has to be measured and balanced. Only then will respect and faith in the British constitution and in this House of Commons be justified and be demonstrated—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's time is up.

7.42 pm

Mr. Piara S. Khabra (Ealing, Southall): It is interesting to speak after a Eurosceptic and anti-European fanatic. I do not share the views of the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) on the European issue.

First, I offer my congratulations to the Secretary of State for the Home Department on his new role, although he is not in his seat. I hope that he will be as successful in the Home Office as he was in the former Department for Education and Employment.

There is much detail to be filled in, but I broadly welcome the proposals in the Queen's Speech. However, I wish to concentrate on crime, as it is a subject that my constituents frequently raised with me during the election campaign.

I hope that under my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, my constituency will continue to benefit from the improvements that took place under his predecessor, because improvements there certainly were. It goes without saying that prevention is better than cure, and in our first four years in office, we took great strides in tackling the causes of crime. In my constituency, the number of people on unemployment benefit has fallen by about 40 per cent. since 1997, and long-term youth unemployment had fallen by about 80 per cent. by February this year. I do not think that I am suggesting anything controversial when I say that providing people with jobs plays a fundamental part in reducing crime.

My constituency has also benefited from the largest ever investment by the Home Office in CCTV security systems. The Ealing community safety and crime strategy group received money for schemes in Southall town centre—part of my constituency—and for a multi-storey car park. The total investment was more than £350,000; that money was provided over the past four years, and now we have to look forward. I believe that the Queen's Speech gives us much to look forward to. Certainly, there is still much to be done, but the agenda outlined in the Queen's Speech gives us an opportunity to continue what we started and to address the key concern of the electorate—improving public services.

Reform of public services is at the heart of the Queen's Speech, and it is vital to keep the word "reform" clearly in mind. Let me however return to the issue of crime and how it affects my constituency. Although we have seen a 10 per cent. overall fall in crime since 1997, there are still many areas of concern for my constituents. For example, in spite of the fact that legislation has been passed banning handguns, some violent crimes are still rising.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing those who live in my constituency is drugs. I have been greatly concerned about this and have held meetings with the local police and community members. Recent reports have highlighted the fact that drug abuse, particularly heroin abuse, is on the increase among young Asians, especially in Southall. In view of that, the Southall community drug education project has been conducting valuable research in conjunction with the university of Central Lancashire's ethnicity and health unit. The principle behind the research is that local people know their own needs best, which is why the Department of Health offered between £5,000 and £25,000 for local black and minority ethnic communities to undertake their own needs assessments.

This local focus is part of the Government's 10-year strategy to tackle drug misuse, which has set tough targets, including halving the numbers of young people using illegal drugs and halving the availability of drugs on our streets. There have been a number of achievements in the past year, including the establishment of the drugs prevention advisory service and information from Ofsted indicating that 93 per cent. of secondary and 75 per cent. of primary schools now have a drugs education policy. I have checked with some of the high schools in my constituency that they are implementing the drugs education policy. Another achievement has been the launch of the positive futures programme, which uses money seized from drug traffickers to support sports and recreational projects and to build up young peoples' confidence so as to encourage them away from drugs and into healthier life styles.

More needs to be done, however, to address this issue and the terrible consequences that it can have for communities. Findings from the Southall project suggest that the specific needs of many ethnic groups are not being addressed properly and that some minority groups, such as Somalis, are being left out of the loop of increasing awareness. I hope that time will be found in this Parliament to take this up further and to address the needs of individual communities.

Tackling drug problems is not easy, as it is not possible to create a "one size fits all" solution. The Asian community, for example, encompasses a wide range of languages, cultures and religious faiths, as well as four generations who have lived in this country and have very different experiences. Thus what is good for one group may not be appropriate for another.

The proposal in the manifesto for a drugs register to keep track of drugs traffickers is a start, and the continued emphasis on class A drugs makes sense. We must pick our fights carefully on this complicated issue.

We must address demand as well as supply. Investment in the treatment of offenders is an intelligent approach and money well spent. Reduced demand will come about only through educating people in ways that address their local circumstances, and I hope that the Government will continue to invest in that goal.

I would also like to take this opportunity to ask the Government to take further steps to deal with asylum seekers. My constituency has suffered from an influx of asylum seekers, which is putting a strain on community relations and public services in the area. An unacceptable extra burden is being placed on the already limited resources available and no extra money is being invested to improve the quality of life in my constituency.

During the election campaign, people raised a number of concerns with me, including the lack of amenities and sports facilities for the young, traffic congestion, and parking difficulties for the business community and others. There has also been a general deterioration in living standards in my constituency for many people, owing to the council's inability to invest in the areas of greatest need. If the area is supporting more people than it can cope with, it has every reason to demand that central Government provide more money to the local authority to redress the imbalance. The area of which I speak is predominantly an ethnic minority area; if neglected, it would reflect badly on the Government's record on race relations.

I have every sympathy for those who are genuinely fleeing persecution, but it is essential that we improve the system of dealing with applications that have already been refused. There is no point in improving the speed of processing applications if people end up staying regardless of the decision of the Home Office. That only makes it harder for genuine applicants, who are then more likely to be resented by the community, which sees services overwhelmed by those who should have been removed. We need to be fairer and firmer in immigration and asylum policy.

That said, I am sure that the Government will tackle those concerns, just as I am sure that they will continue to address the concerns of the electorate throughout the country. The people of Britain sent a clear signal during the election that our public services are the issue that is of most importance to them. People want—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's time is up. I call the hon. Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Dodds).

7.52 pm

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North): First, I congratulate and pay tribute to all hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I hope that I can live up to the high standard that they have set.

It is a great honour for me to participate in this debate and to represent the people of Belfast, North in the House. They have done me the honour of electing me to Belfast city council and to the Northern Ireland Assembly, but it is a particular privilege and honour to be here as a Member of this House, the mother of Parliaments. I thank them for returning me with one of the largest swings recorded in Northern Ireland political history—reversing a 13,000 Ulster Unionist majority and turning it into a 6,300 majority for the Democratic Unionists.

I pledge to my constituents—all my constituents—that I will work hard on their behalf and I assure them and the House that I will raise issues of concern to them and to the wider community in Northern Ireland, both in my representations to Ministers and on the Floor of the House.

My predecessor, Cecil Walker, was a Member of this House for 18 years, serving from 1983. For any Member, it was a difficult task to represent a constituency in Northern Ireland through some of the worst years of violence, the troubles and civil unrest. It was even more so for a Member representing Belfast, North, which has borne a disproportionately high level of violence and deaths owing to terrorism throughout the troubles. I put

on record my appreciation of Cecil Walker's service and the sacrifice that he and his family made throughout those years. I wish him well in retirement.

I have had the honour and privilege not only to know Cecil but to know other former Members who represented my constituency in this House. I can think of the late Johnny McQuade, who served here as a Democratic Unionist party member between 1979 and 1983—he was Cecil Walker's predecessor. I have fond memories of Johnny McQuade, who was an ex-Chindit, who served in Her Majesty's forces and was a Shankhill road man born and bred. I now have the honour to represent that area in the House. Johnny was a man of few words but of great integrity and dedication and I am honoured to follow in his footsteps and in those of other distinguished Members for Belfast, North.

One such Member was Montgomery Hyde, who was the Unionist Member of Parliament for the constituency between 1950 and 1959. One of his great claims to fame was that he was the author of a book on the life of Sir Edward Carson, the founding father of Unionism. Sir Edward served in this House with great distinction and held high office—he was eventually elevated to the other place as Lord of Appeal in Ordinary and took the title of Lord Carson of Duncairn, which is part of my constituency. He represented the area with great distinction between 1918 and 1921.

I am honoured to follow in the footsteps of the founding father of Unionism. At the time when Carson represented Belfast, North, Belfast in general and the constituency in particular were at the forefront of forging strong manufacturing and trading links with other parts of the United Kingdom and the world. The constituency has a rich and diverse historical, cultural, architectural and industrial heritage. It runs from Belfast city centre to the beautiful Cave Hill country park and the famous Cave Hill itself, which is synonymous with Belfast. Any visitor to the city cannot overlook that hill, which is part of my constituency.

The constituency also takes in part of Newtownabbey borough council, which includes one of the largest housing estates in Europe—the Rathcoole estate. Some of the best known landmarks are contained within the constituency, such as Belfast cathedral, Belfast castle and other places of some notoriety, such as Crumlin Road jail. Some distinguished colleagues of mine have spent some time in that jail, but it is no longer a place that receives inmates.

The area is known far and wide for its artistic creativity. I am glad at the way in which the local Departments at home and the council have worked to turn the cathedral quarter into an area where cultural and artistic activities are to be encouraged and promoted. Most of all, it is an area in which there are people who care passionately and deeply about their communities and who want to build a better future. I intend to give whatever assistance I can as long as they do me the honour of sending me to this House.

Belfast, North is also known for many of the worst reasons. Hon. Members will be aware that, while there are the famous landmarks that I mentioned, there are many others that scar the area. It has the highest number of so-called peace walls of any constituency in Northern Ireland—walls that divide communities for security purposes. We have lost more than 600 people in the

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constituency as a result of terrorist violence. The area has seen widespread movement of populations and communities. It contains some of the worst areas of economic and social deprivation in Northern Ireland, and I dare say in the entire kingdom.

My job, in partnership with other people, is to try to put things right—that was our manifesto pledge to the people of Belfast, North—and that means not only the political and constitutional issues but the economic and social issues that affect our constituents so deeply.

I come to the House with a clear mandate not only as a Unionist—which I am and I am proud to be—but as a campaigning Member of the House, to work for the social and economic betterment of all my constituents.

Of the 20 most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, six are in north Belfast. In Crumlin ward, which is predominantly Protestant, 25.9 per cent. of people are short-term unemployed and 11.6 per cent. are long-term unemployed, compared with an average in Northern Ireland of 9.3 and 4.2 per cent. respectively. In the New Lodge ward, which is predominantly and overwhelmingly nationalist and Roman Catholic, 62 per cent. of households are in receipt of housing benefit, compared with a Northern Ireland average of 24 per cent. Those figures highlight the levels of deprivation and social need—problems which have been exacerbated by and have undoubtedly been a contributory factor in the high levels of violence and terrorism that the constituency has witnessed over the past 30 years.

I sought election to the House because I believe in the need to bring regeneration and renewal in place of decline and deprivation, in the form of more jobs, better training and skills provision, better housing, provision for our young people, better education, better health provision, and a better and cleaner environment. That is what people, whether they are Protestant or Roman Catholic, whatever their background, are demanding; it is what they deserve.

Progress is being made, but Members will be aware of the current problems in my constituency. Members will be aware that in recent days we have again seen street confrontation, violence, the police out having to defend communities—even the Army having to be called in to give back-up to the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Yesterday I had the sad task of having to stand in a local Presbyterian church in my constituency that has been the target of arsonists, as has a Roman Catholic chapel in a neighbouring constituency.

All those attacks are deplorable, and I hope that the talks that are going on between communities to try to resolve these issues will be successful. However, people I meet in my constituency repeatedly ask me why, when in other parts of the United Kingdom there is a demand for more policing—more policemen and women on the beat—in Northern Ireland the police service is being demoralised and decimated and its numbers reduced as a result of the implementation of the Patten proposals, under the terms of the Belfast agreement.

The hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) mentioned the yob culture. Other Members have spoken about increasing crime. In north Belfast and other parts of the Province, we have a continuing terrorist threat. We have so-called dissidents perpetrating violence. We have all the problems of antisocial behaviour and crime that

other constituencies have, made even worse because of paramilitary influence. And yet, uniquely, our police service has been cut. The numbers have been cut from 13,000 to 7,000. We have large-scale demoralisation and high levels of sickness.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman has had his time allocation.

8.2 pm

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Dodds) on that very considered speech, in which he reminded us not only of the magnificence of the city in which he has his constituency, but of its many areas of deprivation—which I understand well, as I come from a very deprived community myself—and the need to address all these problems, and to do so regardless of the allegiances of the people of those areas. I thank him very much for that speech. I hope that he will enjoy his time in this place; that he will make a contribution, as he has done tonight, to our debates; and that he will take up the many opportunities that he will be offered. I thank him for the generous tributes that he paid to his predecessors.

I welcome my right hon. Friends to their new positions and congratulate the Home Secretary on a very considered speech. The subject of today's debate is home affairs and constitution, and I hope that, after many excellent speeches on law and order, the House will give me its indulgence when I raise an issue that I consider to be of extreme constitutional importance: the democratic deficit that we have in the House as a result of the selection processes of our political parties.

This first Parliament of the 21st century is more than 82 per cent. male. The shadow Chancellor was right when he said this week:

"The proportion of women here is too low . . . In my party, the under-representation by women is truly chronic."—[Official Report, 25 June 2001; Vol. 370, c. 404.]

I welcome the commitment made in the Queen's Speech to give parties the right to take positive action to increase women's representation in the House. Last year, I introduced a ten-minute Bill to amend the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, in an effort to free political parties from the tribunal decision in the Jepson case, which found that the employment section of the Sex Discrimination Act applied to Members of Parliament. Since that time, an in-depth analysis has been carried out by Meg Russell of the constitution unit based at University College London, and a timely paper on international comparisons has been produced, which I recommend to my right hon. Friends.

In this country, we are lagging far behind our European partners in increasing women's representation and in legislating to enable political parties to take appropriate action. Those who opposed my amendment to the SDA frequently argued that even if United Kingdom equality law were amended, positive action in selection, such as all-women shortlists, would fall foul of European Union equal treatment law or the European convention on human rights. I believe that a study of other positive action measures in other European countries gives the lie to these criticisms.

Sweden, with a Parliament 43 per cent. composed of women Members, heads the list of European democracies in terms of women's representation. The UK has slipped

to No. 33 in that list. In Sweden, being a candidate is not regarded—as I believe it cannot be here, either—as a contract of employment. It is a position of trust. In the early 1990s, women in Sweden threatened to start an all-woman party. Nothing could be more of a spur to the political parties to put their own houses in order. As a consequence, the Social Democratic party adopted positive action in candidate selection. Other parties followed, with the result that 44 per cent. of Members of Parliament elected in 1994 were women. At no time has there been any challenge in domestic, EU or human rights legislation to the positive action adopted by the majority of political parties in Sweden.

Norway has a similar record. Positive action to increase women's representation has been used for the past 10 years. The majority of parties adopted a rule of at least 40 per cent. women to be selected, and currently, 36 per cent. of the Parliament is made up of women. Again, there has been no legal challenge.

Germany and France present equally useful case histories. In Germany, quotas have been adopted ranging from 30 per cent. in the Conservative CDU to 50 per cent. in the German Socialist party. As a consequence of those measures, women constitute 31 per cent. of the German Parliament. Again, there has been no legal challenge in Europe or under human rights law. But France presents the most striking case of radical action. All attempts to legislate for positive action for women failed in France over many years as a result of the objections of France's Constitutional Council, leaving the French Parliament with a mere 10 per cent. women. However, three years ago the French constitution had to be amended to take account of the new equality clauses of the Amsterdam treaty. As a consequence, positive action became enshrined in law, opening the way for a new electoral law requiring equality in selection.

In local elections carried out since the election law was passed last year, the proportion of women rose from 22 per cent. to 48 per cent. Parties can be debarred from election, and lose state funding, if they do not comply with the strict 50:50 equality law. Because there is so much ground to make up in France, the French Socialist party has proposed that in places where women were candidates in 1997, only women will be selected, and that in all seats where MPs are retiring, only women will be eligible to be candidates.

I give these examples to demonstrate how very modest is the Government's proposal to legislate to allow, but not require, political parties to take positive action in selection to redress gender imbalance.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that great progress has been made in this country in setting up the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament? A positive mechanism was used by a political party to ensure that the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament have some of the best representation of women in Europe. In fact, there are more women than men in the Cabinet of the Welsh Assembly.

Joan Ruddock: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is absolutely right, of course. The difficulty was that that was a one-off mechanism. The selection of women has fallen back since then, and we need to return to the point that she so rightly describes.

If the French measures that I have mentioned were adopted here, there would be rioting in our constituency parties and some hon. Gentlemen would adopt a policy of never retiring. Action is urgent. The progress made by the Labour party, which my hon. Friend has just outlined, in adopting twinning and all-women short lists before 1997 has been abruptly halted as my party's membership has reverted to type in the selections for the general election. Other parties in the House have made little or no progress, with the notable exception of the parties in Northern Ireland, which have returned three women after a gap of 30 years.

On present trends, it would take more than 30 years to reach parity in the House. That is absolutely unacceptable. Time is of the essence. It is likely that the selection of candidates for the next general election will begin in 2003, making legislation in this Session a necessity for those parties that will need to present rule changes to their annual conferences in 2002.

No one disputes that there are men in this House who have championed women's interests, but men cannot bring a woman's perspective to the whole range of political concerns. Women Members contribute to the House through different life experiences and from different perspectives. Furthermore, women voters believe that women Members of Parliament better understand the realities of women's lives. Perhaps if the House were more representative, in gender and colour, of our contemporary society, we might make an impact on voter apathy. I urge my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to introduce legislation to allow positive action in the selection of candidates as soon as possible, and I ask the official Opposition to make it very clear that they will support that legislation when it is debated in the House.

8.12 pm

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): I want to concentrate on constitutional issues, especially on one that has been raised by several hon. Members—the sadly low turnout at the general election.

First, I want to note the fact that the Gracious Speech refers to consultations on further reforms to the House of Lords. It seems clear that the Government do not know how to proceed to stage 2 of House of Lords reform. Despite the warnings, which we in the Conservative party issued four years ago, that stage 1 should not be implemented until stage 2 was agreed, the Government went ahead, as they have done so many times, in an arrogant way, removing most of the hereditary peers and replacing them with their own Labour party cronies. More Labour life peers have been appointed in four years than Conservative life peers were appointed in 18 years. That demonstrates the need for a significant change in attitude.

The Government have the effrontery to suggest that the present arrangements are somehow better and more democratic than those that preceded them. The Prime Minister has consistently opposed the granting of honours for political work. It is a moot point as to whether that is right or wrong. Yet having made that announcement over and again, the Prime Minister has used peerages as a currency to buy vacancies in safe Labour constituencies to put in his own appointed men—often those who have crossed the Floor of the House from another party.

I congratulate those Labour Members who have refused to be bought in that way, and I respect their integrity, but that is just one aspect of an arrogant attitude to power that

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goes much further in snubbing convention and tradition. The Parliament Acts were improperly invoked during the previous Parliament, yet barely a murmur was raised against that. Even the Chancellor, in his petty way, continues to refuse to wear the appropriate dress for his Mansion House speech. [Interruption.] The fact that Labour Members think that irrelevant is precisely my point. It is not irrelevant; it is not only a gesture of the Government's arrogance to be different, but it is downright bad manners not to accommodate the wishes of one's hosts in attending any function. That is one more example of how the Government's arrogance of power shows itself.

As several hon. Members have said, there has been an absolute abandonment of any semblance of accountability to Parliament. That has largely been achieved with the connivance of supine Back Benchers. I do not pretend for a moment that that all started in 1997; it did not, but it has certainly grown inexorably worse under the Labour Government.

The constitution may not be a popular political issue, but from the Government's attitude to it, we can divine their attitude to anyone who takes a contrary view on any of their policies. Indeed, not only will they not enter into reasoned debate, but they will often not even recognise the fact that there is an issue to debate. Other hon. Members have mentioned the West Lothian question, yet the Government firmly refuse to accept that there is an issue, let alone consider how to address it. So is it any wonder that the electorate are increasingly cynical about politicians and that so few people voted three weeks ago. The election result was disastrous not only for my party, but for democracy and even for the Labour party, which, despite the translation into seats, obtained 3 million-odd votes fewer than before.

I want to concentrate for a moment on the Opposition and on my party's role. My party has to regain its standing with the electorate, not just to win power—important as that may be—but to restore its credibility as an Opposition in the meantime. True parliamentary democracy needs a credible and robust Opposition, but it also needs an end to permanent confrontation. It is no wonder that the public are disillusioned when all that they hear is our criticising each other, rather than having reasoned debates. If there were ever any doubt in my mind that that was the public's view, it was removed on the doorsteps of my constituency during the election. Over and again, the people of Britain demanded a new style of non-confrontational politics.

What can my party do to restore public interest in Parliament and in our democracy? I have always believed that the Conservative party's principles represent the natural, gut instincts of the British people. That is why I am a Conservative, and it seems that the Prime Minister agrees, which explains his rhetoric. Of course, the reality is that what he does totally belies his rhetoric, but the rhetoric seeks to appeal to the same gut instinct.

I recall my first job as a full-time employee. When I was 17, I worked on a farm with a large number of other farm workers. They thought that it was not worth working overtime because of the tax that they would have to pay. I know full well from our discussions that they all voted Labour, as did millions of other manual workers, because they thought that the socialism on offer would look after them. However, beneath the surface, they were

red-blooded capitalists who sought profit from a deal and a reward for their efforts. If we listen to the Government, we are all capitalists now, but the seam of Conservative principles goes much deeper into the hearts and minds of the British people.

Our party has consistently stood for the rule of law and the maintenance of order, regardless of provocation or even sympathy with the cause. The Conservative party truly believes in choice and has sought to provide it in office. We believe in individual responsibility, not just to make decisions in the expectation that the state will help, but one in which people accept that if they get it wrong, they must accept the consequences. There are many other ways in which the Conservative party's principles go deep into the instincts and inheritance of the British people. Our challenge is to make people understand that. I know that that is of little consequence to Labour Members. Indeed, many of them will disagree with what I say, but ultimately what is right for my party is right for democracy and for the standing of politics in this country.

The Conservative party has always recognised our responsibility to help others. Not for nothing did it used to be said that the Church of England was the Conservative party at prayer. In those days, Conservatives ran local charities and gave their services to the communities and sought nothing in return. Yet after all that, we have allowed ourselves to be seen as a different type of party—a party of hard men; selfish, dogmatic and greedy. None of those things is true, but it is hardly surprising that we are seen that way when we do not explain our principles; when we do not explain that lowering rates of tax can often increase tax yield. If we are worried about funding public services, it is tax yields rather than tax rates that matter.

We allow our views on Europe to be portrayed as polarised or isolationist, rather than spelling out the vision that I described in the House some years ago of a kaleidoscope of nations working together but each retaining their identity. When we talk about public services, we sometimes sound as if they are for other people, whereas in reality the vast majority of Conservatives, like myself, use the state education system and national health service. I believe that people expect from our public services quality, a service free at the point of use and a service that is reasonably convenient.

No one other than those wedded to socialism really cares who owns the bricks and mortar or who pays the nurses and teachers. It is the quality and availability of the service that matters. That is why the debate about privatisation is obsolete. The debate is not about selling off or charging but about the means of delivering a service to the general public. The Conservative Government began to move down the road of making available a range of provision which included the role of charities and religious bodies. Despite the rhetoric of the past few days—we heard it again this afternoon—much of that provision has been removed by the Labour Government.

The Conservative party will not redeem itself by trying to turn the clock back or by explaining our policies more clearly. We need to re-engage with the people of this country. My party has its part to play in restoring the status of politics and politicians. That is essential for my party's interests, but not just for us as a—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has had his time allocation.

8.23 pm

Mr. Wayne David (Caerphilly): I rise to make my first contribution in this House conscious of the fact that, as the Member of Parliament for Caerphilly, I am part of a long Labour tradition. My immediate predecessor was Ron Davies, a former Secretary of State for Wales. He made a huge contribution to the achievement of Welsh devolution.

Other former Members of Parliament for Caerphilly include Mr. Fred Evans, who was the Member from 1968 when he won a famous by-election until 1979. His predecessor was Mr. Ness Edwards, a famous miners leader in south Wales and the author of a scholarly book on the history of the South Wales Miners Federation. He rose to become Postmaster-General. He reflected the coal-dominated reality of south Wales better than anyone else I can think of.

Today, south Wales is very different and so is the Caerphilly constituency. Coal has given way to a more diverse economy. Now manufacturing is king and probably as many of Caerphilly's work force are employed outside the constituency as within it. That is not to say that we do not have the legacy of coal; there are still coal tips in the constituency that need to be removed. The award of compensation to miners and their widows must be speeded up and paid as quickly as possible.

As the Caerphilly constituency responds to a changing world, new priorities emerge and fresh issues come to the fore. In the southern part of the constituency—the area dominated by Caerphilly town—we have a town which is famous for its cheese and its huge, magnificent 13th century castle. That town is an important tourist attraction with huge potential, which will be fulfilled only if we preserve the countryside around Caerphilly mountain and further east towards the village of Machen.

At the same time, in the northern part of the constituency—an area that gave inspiration to the artist Lowry in the 1960s—there is an urgent need for the Bargoed bypass. It is needed to relieve traffic congestion in the town and bring economic regeneration to the upper part of the Rhymney valley. Infrastructure and economic development initiatives are particularly important now in the Caerphilly county borough area due to job losses at Corus in nearby Llanwern and elsewhere. Yes, unemployment is at an all time low, but there is a need for more to be done.

Of common concern to all parts of my constituency, north and south, is the need for a new hospital. We must act so that potential and actual patients in the constituency and county borough need not have to travel long distances for medical treatment. It is unacceptable that my constituents have to travel to Cardiff, Newport or Merthyr Tydfil when it is widely acknowledged that a new hospital is needed in the borough. I hope that progress can be made on that in the near future.

I shall work closely on those issues with the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Mr. Tuhig), and my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Havard), who both represent parts of the Caerphilly county borough and share my philosophy and priorities. They both believe that there is a need for an increased emphasis on better and more effective policing.

We have seen recent improvements in the crime figures in the Caerphilly area, but there is real concern about drug-related crime and increasing antisocial behaviour.

I am convinced that the Government here in London and the National Assembly for Wales are correct in tackling the underlying social factors behind crime. There is a direct correlation between social deprivation and the incidence of crime. I welcome the support given to young people by the National Assembly through the publication of its policy statement "Extending Entitlement". I say that as someone who has worked for the past two years for the youth service in Wales.

There is also a need to make policing more effective. That is why I warmly welcome the proposed legislation to take action against money laundering so that recovery of the proceeds of crime and drug dealing is easier. We also need greater police co-operation across police force boundaries. However, there is no ducking the fact that the police forces in Wales need more resources.

Gwent police, for example, suffers from the deployment of an obtuse funding formula. It needs a fairer funding formula to give it, perhaps, £150,000 a year extra. That money is needed to tackle crime in the areas of greatest deprivation in the south Wales valleys. The previous Home Office Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), promised to review that formula and I hope that his replacement will realise that commitment.

I am privileged to serve as the Member of Parliament for Caerphilly. I thank the people of my constituency for the trust that they have placed in me and my local party for its support. I was a Member of the European Parliament for 10 years. That experience has made me a committed European and internationalist. David Williams was one of the most famous sons of Caerphilly. We have heard much about Edmund Burke, but David Williams was a friend of Thomas Paine. He argued forcefully in the 1780s and 1790s for democracy, liberty and freedom. He helped to draft the first French constitution and in 1792 was made an honorary citizen of the new French republic. I cannot hope to follow David Williams's achievements, but I hope to reflect his internationalism and integrity through the way in which I represent the people of Caerphilly.

8.30 pm

Derek Conway (Old Bexley and Sidcup): It is a great pleasure to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. David), on which I congratulate him. He spoke with confidence and passion and is clearly a very decent representative for his constituency. His speech will stand him in good stead and we wish him well. As a retread, I do not suppose that my contribution counts as a maiden—I am not sure that it is possible to be a virgin twice.

When my service in the House was rudely interrupted in 1997, I left the Chamber as a Government Whip. I went on to become chief executive of the Cats Protection League, which is Britain's largest and oldest cat welfare charity. It is the most amazing organisation and helps 165,000 cats a year, has 79,000 members and sites and groups in 280 constituencies. One of its main aims is the neutering of cats. Some of my more cruel friends suggested that as a Government Whip I had gone from neutering Members of Parliament to neutering cats. I always argued that it was a good process for both species because it stops them wandering.

It is a great pleasure and honour to represent Old Bexley and Sidcup. Although it is a south-east London borough, emotionally it remains part of Kent. Some

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85 per cent. of my constituents are home owners and we are blessed with excellent grammar, community and primary schools, which is part of the reason why so many people choose to make their homes in that wonderful constituency.

My constituents were, of course, served for 51 years by Sir Edward Heath, who was Father of the House and a former Prime Minister. Perhaps less known to hon. Members is the fact that he was also a colonel in the Royal Artillery during the second world war and gave distinguished service to his country in every respect. Sir Edward held controversial views on the European Union, but at least he always had the courage and tenacity to stick by them. In 1985, I was one of 12 Members who voted in defiance of Mrs. Thatcher's three-line Whip on the Single European Act. I thought that that demonstrated some courage, although I did not get a medal for it; instead, I was made to spend even more time on the Back Benches.

Despite our different views on the future of Europe, Sir Edward was a extraordinarily decent Member to follow. Although I am a bit cynical after 33 years in active politics about the size of a personal vote that a Member of Parliament accrues, I found on the doorsteps of Old Bexley and Sidcup that Sir Edward was held in the deepest affection and the greatest respect. It will be an enormous challenge to follow his service in the House.

In supporting the Conservative amendment to the Gracious Speech, I want to highlight the problem of police numbers. The notifiable offences rate in the borough of Bexley increased by 19 per cent. last year. Although it is a tranquil and lovely place to live, crime is of great concern to my constituency. The Bexley division of the Metropolitan police force is an extremely able and talented service, but it is considerably undermanned. It has fewer than half the number of police officers for an average London borough of our type. Just before the general election campaign was announced, the division was pleased when Mayor Livingstone—no doubt to help some of those whom he hopes to rejoin in the fullness of time—announced an extra 20 police officers for it. Sadly, 10 were taken away to form the serious crime group, which investigates murder. In Old Bexley and Sidcup and in the London borough of Bexley in general it is highly unlikely that anyone will be murdered, but it is likely that people will suffer from vandalism, burglary or car theft, and those crimes require the evidence of a police officer in the area.

Sidcup high street is struggling to survive as a retail centre against an enormous problem of vandalism. Its residents were disappointed that the Home Office did not agree to the closed circuit television application that the town made in the recent round. Vandalism is a problem and retailers are struggling. Part of my campaign will be to press the Home Office Minister responsible to reconsider that decision.

It is not only the major centres that have to deal with that problem: shops in the Oval have been frequently vandalised. It was bad enough that they suffered from paint spraying, but the little monsters have got used to using glass cutters so that they can make their presence permanently felt. Struggling to meet the demands of

both central and local government in a hostile retail environment in which there is vandalism makes earning a living very difficult. Those traders are struggling.

It is not good enough to say that those who commit such crimes need more counselling or help. The victims of those crimes have lost patience with that approach. It does not matter whether one sits in this Chamber as a Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat Member, or as a member of any other party, the fact is that victims of crime in our constituencies are fed up. It will take parties of all persuasions to have the courage to finance the police service properly and to get policemen back on the beat.

It is very good to be back in this Chamber; it has been gratifying to have been welcomed by members of all parties. Those who lose their seats will find it a very cold experience. One of my tasks now that I am back is not to rest until I am sure that the constituents of Old Bexley and Sidcup are far better protected by a better-manned police service than at present.

8.35 pm

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East): I congratulate the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Derek Conway) on what, as he said, is probably not his maiden speech. From listening to him, I can tell that he has lost none of the good humour for which I knew him in his previous incarnation in the House. One thing that always struck me about Ted Heath was the extent to which, no matter his achievements in this House, as Prime Minister, on the international stage or domestically, he gave the impression, which the hon. Gentleman has just confirmed, that he was an assiduous constituency Member of Parliament. That speaks well not only of Ted Heath but of the hon. Gentleman who has picked up that baton. I am sure that he will run with it in the appropriate manner.

I want briefly to comment on the James Bulger case and events of last week, to which the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary referred in their opening speeches. Denise Fergus and Ralph Bulger are both my constituents. None of us has the imagination really to appreciate what they have gone through over the years as the parents involved in losing a child in such horrendous circumstances. My heart goes out to them, and I am sure that everyone in the House shares that sentiment.

It is unwise for politicians to try to second-guess the decisions of the parole board or, for that matter, of those in the Home Office who have had to be party to those decisions, if not make them themselves. I say that for the simple reason that I have not had sight—nor would it be appropriate for me to do so—of the reports prepared on the two young men concerned. To comment without the knowledge and understanding of what has happened to them and where they stand now would therefore be unfair.

I want to make two points in the remaining time available to me, the first of which is to do with policing. I certainly welcome the target of 6,000 additional police officers that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary reaffirmed in his opening speech. Most people in my constituency and, indeed, across the country will welcome that target. Although it may be important to increase the number of police available, what we do with those additional police officers is also important—how they are organised and how they address the problems of crime faced by many of our constituents.

The major problem experienced in my constituency can exist in all sorts of different communities, and not always just in areas that are unstable in some way or suffer great social and economic deprivation. My constituency is very mixed. There are rural parts, parts known in classic sociological jargon as C1 and C2, and there is Kirkby, which comprises a series of council estates. The problem is low-level street crime—which I consider an inappropriate description—or crime and disorder. Previous Home Office Ministers, my right hon. Friends the Members for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) and for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Alun Michael), had a new vision of how to deal with such problems and they gave the police and local authorities some useful tools for doing so, but I believe that that solid foundation must now be built on by reviewing the method of policing, revisiting the punishments available and adopting new and innovative approaches.

On Merseyside, the chief constable has now reorganised his police force in such a way as to put policemen back on to the streets. He has used the existing wards structure and allocated a number of officers—usually an inspector, two sergeants and 20 policemen—to a defined geographical area. That is their patch, which they work mostly on foot. The Home Office is monitoring the progress of that development. It is not the only story—other parts of Merseyside's police force are tackling other problems—but it is a useful start that deserves our support. We should keep a close eye on Merseyside, because developments there may well serve as models for the future.

I should like to make a plea to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle). Merseyside police authority and the chief constable are taking a risk. Although I believe that they will address the problems as people experience them on the street, they might find themselves in conflict with the key performance indicators that Merseyside police force is supposed to meet. While enhancing people's quality of life, they may well fail to meet those performance indicators. It would be wrong if they were penalised for having the courage to act to meet the public agenda.

We need to consider ways in which the police and the criminal justice system can address offending behaviour very early on in a criminal career. The youngster in my constituency who is throwing a brick through a bus window tonight is a nuisance, and a dangerous one at that, but five years down the line he—it usually is a he—could be the local drugs baron, a house burglar or car thief, or committing even more serious crimes. Stopping youngsters early in their criminal career and giving the police and the courts proper remedies to break into the spiral towards ever more serious offences are among the most useful things that we can do. I should like to suggest two things that might help. I do not pretend that they are easy, that they will require no resources, or that I have a fully worked out plan for delivering, but they deserve serious consideration.

First, there is a role in the process for fixed penalties. I know that when my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister suggested that some time ago, the response was derision, but a fixed penalty gives the offender the chance to acknowledge the crime and have it dealt with quickly, and it may provide the early warning that a person needs to stop him doing something worse. That will work for some

people, but not for others. There is no system in place for it, so it will not happen quickly. Secondly, an early custodial sentence—perhaps for people as young as 12 or 14 if additional resources are created within the prison estate—might be the wake-up call that is needed to stop youngsters developing their criminal career any further.

When opening the debate, my right hon. Friend invited new ideas and said that they would be welcome. I offer those two new ideas to my colleagues in the Home Office.

In conclusion, if we do not start to address so-called low-level disorder and street crime early in people's offending careers, and if we do not stop the drift that seems to be the norm in some areas, we will reap the whirlwind in years to come. I believe that the problem can be addressed, and that the Home Secretary has the will to do so. There will probably be a consensus in the House in favour of measures that start to address it effectively.

8.45 pm

John Thurso (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in the House, especially in a debate touching on the constitution.

I should like to preface my remarks with an expression of gratitude to the House and a pre-emptive apology. My gratitude is for the introduction and passing of the House of Lords Act 1999, which permitted me to shake off the shackles of the peerage and return to being a normal human being and enabled me to fulfil a long-held dream of seeking election to the House of Commons. My pre-emptive apology concerns the fact that, having sat in another place for a number of years, I observed former Members of the House of Commons taking up a seat there, and saw the difficulty that they had throwing off the habit of addressing colleagues as hon. Gentlemen. If, by mischance, I address the Chair as "my Lord" or refer to any Member as "noble", I ask the House to understand that I mean no disrespect; it is merely old habits coming through.

It is the tradition—and, for me, a particular pleasure—to pay tribute to the one's predecessor. It is a great pleasure because the former Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross is a great personal friend; Robert MacLennan served in the House for just over 35 years and made many major contributions. He led one party for a short time and helped to co-found the Liberal Democrat party. In the previous Parliament, with the then Leader of the House, he was responsible for the report that allowed much of the constitutional legislation that was introduced to go through. However, he is most remembered by all those who know him for his extraordinary assiduity as a constituency Member. Having knocked on many doors during the election campaign, as many other hon. Members will have done, I found out just how hard he worked and how many people spoke of him with affection. Indeed, only 24 hours before the election, he was with me, knocking on doors and collecting more casework, which he took great pleasure in handing over to me in recent weeks.

As we got to know each other well, Robert MacLennan told me that he would never have stood for or sought election in any other constituency. I share that view; I would never have wished to seek election in any constituency other than my home of Caithness, Sutherland

[John Thurso]

and Easter Ross. It is an extraordinarily large and varied constituency. I am not sure whether it is the largest; I think that that honour belongs to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), but my constituency is a close second. When I drive home from Inverness airport and cross the constituency boundary, I can see a sign telling me that I have 91 miles to go until I get home; there is therefore a large geographical area to cover.

My constituency not only has geographic variety, but great economic variety. We have new industries, such as Dounreay, the former fast-breeder reactor plant, which is in the process of being decommissioned and has a genuine opportunity to become a world centre of excellence in decommissioning skills that we can export to other countries. At the other end of the constituency in Invergordon are some of the major players in rig refurbishment, looking after the oil industry. Many new businesses have recently come in; we have the largest manufacturer of chest freezers in the world, and we have the company that produces all of Madonna's cassettes. Much in the constituency, therefore, is surprising.

The backbone of the constituency—the heart of it—remains the rural traditional industries of farming and fishing, and to those I would nowadays add tourism. These are all industries that are in considerable trouble.

The fishing industry is in severe crisis. There is a major problem of balancing fish stocks and fishing effort, and I look forward to an opportunity to bring the matter before the House on another occasion.

Farming in my constituency, as in many others, is the glue that holds together many of the rural areas. The entire fabric of, for example, remote parts of Sutherland is held together by farming and crofting.

The recent foot and mouth crisis has had a terrible effect. Happily, my constituency has not had the problems of those where large slaughters have had to take place. None the less, the future seems very difficult, particularly with the tradition within the constituency of rearing stock for transfer to other areas of the country. I look forward to bringing both these matters before the House.

I ask for the indulgence of the House to speak briefly on tourism. I must declare an interest. I am still involved with a number of tourist businesses. I am also patron or president of several industry bodies. Tourism is the industry in which I grew up. I started my working life in the kitchens of the Berkeley, and I did day release at Westminster college. I worked my way up through that industry.

Tourism, as a result of foot and mouth, is having a difficult time. It can be seen from the extent of the crisis what an impact the tourist industry has. It is one of the largest employers. According to the Government's figures, it produces about 7 per cent. of national gross domestic product. It needs to be properly supported and resourced. I hope very much that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport will ensure that resources are made available to encourage overseas tourists, through the British Tourist Authority, to come to the United Kingdom.

I turn to reform of the House of Lords. I was delighted to read in the Gracious Speech that the Government intend to go ahead with stage 2 of the reform, which I warmly

welcome, but I have two concerns. The first is about the words "after consultation". I hope that that will not mean that reform disappears into the long grass and that what comes out at the end is a somewhat more anodyne reform. I believe absolutely—this is said with the conviction of having sat in another place—that there is only one outcome, and that is for the House of Lords to be either fully elected, or in large part elected.

My second concern is that reform will perhaps be predicated too much on the Wakeham report. One of the key elements of that report is the assumption that the House should always retain its superiority or supremacy over the other place, which is dangerous. As a number of hon. Members have said, it is important that the House takes the opportunity to consider the functions of not only another place but of this place, and to regard reform as a marriage of two equal partners. Both Houses have different roles and should have different roles, but the roles are complementary. I believe that ultimately the two Houses should be fundamentally equal.

I have come to serve in this place with immense humility and respect for its traditions. Having sat in another place and having had the good fortune to go through an election, I understand, despite the aversion that one has to being on green, how important it is, and what a great mother of Parliaments it is. I look forward to serving my constituents, to whom I am immensely grateful, to the best of my ability and to making what modest contribution I can to the workings of the House.

8.49 pm

Mr. Parmjit Dhanda (Gloucester): First, I congratulate the new hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (John Thurso) on an excellent speech. It was probably made that much tougher because my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks) had already accused him of being a dead ringer for Lord Lucan. The hon. Gentleman's speech was very well done.

When we sit on these Benches during the course of a day we might sometimes wonder whether it is all worth while. It has been worth while for me already, having today sat next to my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones), a new Member, for the past six hours. I feel as if I know North Durham extremely well now. I look forward to returning to Gloucester and perhaps talking about a twinning arrangement between our two constituencies.

In all seriousness, it gives me great pleasure to be called to make my maiden speech at the very end of the debate on the Queen's Speech, which for my party marks the beginning of a second full term in office—the first in our history.

Many of the measures in the Queen's Speech enshrine changes for which my predecessor, Tess Kingham, campaigned in her four years as Member for Gloucester. It is a fitting tribute to her that, as we work to create health and education systems that we can all be proud of, the children of Gloucester are excelling, school standards are rising and my constituents are to benefit from a £30 million new hospital development on which work has already begun. It is just one of many exciting new developments in Gloucester over the next 10 years. The building blocks have been laid for a new college of higher education; a state-of-the-art tennis centre is soon to be joined by one of the region's finest new leisure centres;

and, with the input of public and private capital, ambitious plans are afoot to transform our town centre and historic docks.

Gloucester is well on its way to becoming a modern city of commerce, leisure and employment opportunity—a city fit for life in the 21st century. Yet it is a city steeped in history, having been built on the Roman town of Glevum more than 900 years ago. As one of only three cities to have hosted a coronation, Gloucester has seen many changes down the years.

When we talk of change, modernisation and renewal, we touch base with many of the issues that were of particular importance to my predecessor in the House. It is no secret that she ultimately became quite frustrated by the pace of change or, as she would say, the slowness of change in institutions such as the House of Commons and some of the jousting that goes with it, although I am sure that she would not want the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) to take to heart her comments in *The Guardian* last week.

As we debate the Queen's speech, my mind goes back to an occasion during the election campaign, just a few weeks ago, when we were visited by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who was then Home Secretary. My local newspaper, *The Citizen*, and the people of Gloucester are delighted by the changes to the criminal justice system proposed in the Queen's Speech, but when my right hon. Friend visited Gloucester, he expressed particular concern about the sentences that were being handed out to dealers of addictive hard drugs such as crack and heroin, which are as much a problem in Gloucester as they are in many other cities.

If we are to build the society that we want, it is imperative that we tackle dealers in hard drugs and I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the new Home Secretary has already said that it will be one of his priorities. I shall be writing to my right hon. Friend supporting *The Citizen's* campaign to ensure that judges are consistent in their sentencing and urging him to look at the possibility of monitoring judges and making them more accountable in sentencing people who commit the particularly vile crime of pushing hard drugs.

I am all too happy to support my local paper's campaign, but like many hon. Members, I am fully aware of the fickleness of the media and, occasionally, their attitude towards politicians, for it was the same newspaper that, some months ago, struggled to come to terms with my role as the Labour candidate in Gloucester.

In his eloquent speech last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) summed up some of the difficulties that I am likely to face. He said that he is never anonymous in the House and nor am I. In my case, it is likewise in my constituency. It is not down to being 6 ft 3 in and being—albeit just—in my twenties. Observant hon. Members may have already noted that, like my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham, I am from a minority group. In fact, we are both Londoners born and bred.

In all seriousness, I pay tribute to the Solicitor-General, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman). She has worked tirelessly to make the House look more like the people whom we represent and hope to represent. I very much welcome the part of the Queen's Speech that will enable more women to be elected to the House, and I hope that people from ethnic minority backgrounds also will be encouraged to stand.

Most of all, I should like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the people of Gloucester who, in the general election campaign, sometimes had to read some quite painful comments about me. After my selection, but before it realised what a splendid fellow I am, my new-found friend, *The Citizen*, said:

"Labour can kiss goodbye to this seat. They might as well hand it over to the Conservatives now. The Labour Party in Gloucester has made the same mistake as the Tories in Cheltenham when they chose a black barrister as candidate and handed the seat to the Liberal Democrats. Mr. Dhanda could withdraw to allow another candidate to be adopted"—

Hon. Members: Shame.

Mr. Dhanda: I am not making this up, honestly. *The Citizen* said:

"Things were so much easier"—

this may appeal more to older Labour Members than to me—

"when candidates were picked by a handful of party elders in a smoke filled room rather than the whole party membership of between 400 and 500 people."

Most painfully of all, not for me but for the residents of Gloucester, *The Citizen* said:

"sad to say, many of the voters of Gloucestershire have yet to reach the advanced state of consciousness to accept a foreigner as their local MP."

The people of Gloucester proved that they are better than that, and I stand here as the very proud Member of Parliament for Gloucester. The people of Gloucester are its greatest asset, and I shall do my utmost to deliver for them a city that is fit for them—a modern, confident and dynamic city that is fit for the 21st century.

9.2 pm

Mr. Paul Goodman (Wycombe): It is delightful to follow the hon. Member for Gloucester (Mr. Dhanda), parts of whose speech I found extremely moving and touching. There may be a lesson in what he said for some parts of my party, too. He did not look nervous at all in making his maiden speech, but I confess that it is with a sensation almost of fear that I rise to address the House for the first time. It is awesome in itself to be a Member of this place, bound up as it is with our country's history and identity, and I am very grateful to the voters of Wycombe for sending me here.

I am aware that I would do well to follow the example of my predecessor, Sir Ray Whitney. In all our dealings, Ray has displayed all the qualities that have been associated with him both in this place and in Wycombe: shrewdness, courtesy, unselfishness and kindness. He was a devoted public servant and is a perceptive thinker, and I believe that the House will miss him.

I shall spare the House the glittering words that new Members have occasionally been known to lavish on their constituencies, although I believe of my own constituency of Wycombe what all hon. Members surely believe of theirs—that it is the best constituency in the country. I am proud to represent it. If a single word could sum up Wycombe for me, that word would be diversity. Wycombe ranges from essentially flourishing areas, such as parts of the countryside around Marlow, to areas that face great challenges, such as parts of High Wycombe itself. Farmers, the socially excluded, London commuters,

[Mr. Paul Goodman]

older people, single parents, the rich, ethnic minorities; all human life—or, at least, much of it—is to be found in Wycombe. It is, in general, a prosperous constituency, but it has some of the problems posed by prosperity, such as traffic and pressure on green space, as well as those posed by poverty, such as social exclusion, especially among our large ethnic minority communities. In short, it can be seen as a kind of cross-section of modern Britain.

This diversity and the changes that drive it would not be incomprehensible to a predecessor of mine, were he alive today. As a young man, Benjamin Disraeli fought High Wycombe three times and lost, as a radical. In middle age, he was elected in an unopposed contest—evidently, he must have had an easier election campaign than I did—for Buckinghamshire, which includes my constituency. He settled at Hughenden Manor, which is also in my constituency.

Disraeli said that in a progressive country, change is constant. I cannot help wondering what he would have made of the Government's plans to meet change, as set out in the Queen's Speech. For what the Queen's Speech illustrates to me is not that the Government and Opposition disagree about the recognition of diversity and the need for change, but that their approaches to change are profoundly different. Let me give an example. Today we are discussing law, order, crime and punishment and, naturally, I support the Conservative amendment. But, as someone once said, there is crime and then there are the causes of crime. Crime must certainly be punished, but the causes of crime must be addressed.

In my constituency, and in others, an increasing number of young people who are growing up have never known the love of two parents, which some of us may sometimes take for granted. Some are young men who have never known their fathers. They are raised and taught almost exclusively by their mums and other women whose work and toil almost never ceases. They have no male role models, except the slightly older men who are active in the local drugs economy. Compared to other children, they are more likely to be excluded from schools and to drift into crime. They can thus stave off, at least for a while, the poverty of income.

What they find more difficult to stave off is the poverty of hope. After a while, it can become almost impossible for such a young person to imagine breaking out of the cycle of crime, family break-up and more poverty of hope. Where there is poverty of hope, there will sooner or later be poverty of income. Single men remain deprived of opportunity, while single mums bear the work load of two parents. It makes for a spiral of social exclusion—as other hon. Members have pointed out—the consequences of which affect us all, whatever our circumstances.

On job creation, the Government emphasise inducing parents to work through means-tested credit schemes. We like to emphasise giving parents more choice about work and care through a simple tax and benefits system. Either way, without stable families and the habits that can be picked up from them, there will be no trained and educated work force; no teachers, doctors or nurses with an ethos of self-sacrifice; no voluntary sector of people prepared to give their time to others; and no charities, clubs or civil society—and, yes, there is such a thing as society.

The challenge of reconciling individual freedom with social obligation is perhaps the greatest challenge of our times. Those Conservatives who like to think of themselves as Disraeli's heirs have a phrase for such a reconciliation: one nation. The Labour party has borrowed that phrase. It is time for Conservative Members to claim ownership of it again.

I end where I began: it is awesome to be a Member of this House. But how can this House maintain its reputation if its powers are to be superseded by the Executive at home and less accountable institutions abroad? How can we live together as one nation if we are to become no nation at all?

9.9 pm

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman) on his maiden speech. His references to Disraeli were entirely apt, considering the tenor of most of his remarks, and I am sure that he will make a positive contribution to the debate that is needed among Conservative Members to create a party that has something valuable to say to the nation.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and his new team at the Home Office on the start that they made in this debate. As my right hon. Friend pointed out, he is building on the excellent foundations laid by my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), who has moved on to entirely different matters. There are many reasons to be concerned about law and order, and we still face serious problems. However, despite the doom and gloom, we must remind ourselves that crime has fallen by about 10 per cent. since 1997.

The Government have reversed the trend of falling police numbers which started in 1993. Police numbers are beginning to rise again, and there has been a huge increase in the number of people applying for initial police training. We have introduced a crimefighting fund, which will ensure that by 2003 there are more police officers on the beat than ever before. More cash has been made available for the police service. Money for victim support has doubled, and rape victims will no longer have to go through the trauma of being cross-examined by defendants.

Despite all those good points, the Government are right not to be complacent. We have to remind ourselves that violent crime has increased, and is part of the yob culture to which many of my right hon. and hon. Friends have referred during the debate. The fear of crime remains high. In my constituency, people are afraid to walk through the town after 9 o'clock in the evening simply because of the threat of danger that large crowds, mainly of young men, seem to pose. That fear exists despite the fact that 99 per cent. of the time there is no danger at all. City centres just feel unsafe. That is why I welcome the police Bill, which aims to create a more effective police service by, among other things, enabling better co-operation across police force boundaries. A more open and independent police complaints system will have benefits for the public and the police. It will give the public confidence and help to improve co-operation with the police.

Initially, police reform could lead to more criminals being caught, but in the long term I foresee a reduction because of the deterrent effect of the increased likelihood

of being caught and the preventive effect of better policing and other anti-crime strategies, such as the "communities that care" programme, which bring together the police, local government, schools, youth clubs and the voluntary sector for the good of the community as a whole. In my local authority area, which covers my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Sir R. Powell), four such projects are getting under way. They have captured the enthusiasm of those involved, and I believe that they will make a significant contribution to reducing crime and creating more cohesive communities that are truly at peace with themselves.

Equally important for the success of the police Bill and anti-crime strategies such as "communities that care" is the modernisation of our criminal justice system, both to speed up the judicial process without sacrificing fairness and to ensure appropriate sentencing. The punishment should fit the crime, but punishment on its own is not enough. It is true that, when a criminal is in prison, the public are protected, but the role of the criminal justice system goes beyond locking up criminals in prison, and the role of the Prison Service goes beyond keeping criminals in custody. Indeed, part of the Prison Service's stated purpose is to look after prisoners "with humanity and help them to lead law-abiding and useful lives in custody and after release."

I believe that a crucial role for the criminal justice system—of which prisoners are a necessary part—is to protect the public. That can be done, as the retiring chief inspector of prisons Sir David Ramsbotham recently put it, "by preventing reoffending". I hope that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will read, inwardly digest, and act on many of the proposals in the lecture that Sir David gave to the Prison Reform Trust eight days ago.

I believe that rehabilitation, the prevention of reoffending and the reduction of reconvictions must be central to the Government's anti-crime strategy. All the good work that will follow from the passing of the measures in the Queen's Speech sponsored by the Home Office will be stunted and disfigured if reconviction rates within two years of release remain at more than 50 per cent. for adults, and at nearly 90 per cent. for those under 18. Those figures must be dramatically reduced.

Prisons will not be working properly until reconviction rates are reduced substantially. The record of Her Majesty's prison at Grendon shows that the rates can be brought down. Rehabilitative work at other prisons, such as at Parc in my constituency, gives grounds for hope. Parc had a very rocky opening 18 months ago, but it is now beginning to work for its inmates and the public. However, the chief inspector of prisons recognises that, despite improvements at Parc and other prisons, there needs to be a thorough re-examination of rehabilitation strategies. Moreover, those attested success stories that are to be found across the prison service must be boldly implemented according to a well financed, properly monitored and coherent strategy.

It is interesting to note that, of the 30 announced, and 23 unannounced, inspection reports through which I have skimmed, 37 seemed to me to cover a range of verdicts that ranged from "very good" to "on balance encouraging" and "positive". The remaining 16 seemed to have serious problems, but in the main even they, on reinspection, showed encouraging signs of improvement.

Home Office projections suggest that the prison population could be higher than 83,000 by the end of the decade, so there is plainly a need to look at alternative

strategies. I believe that we need a stronger, more closely supervised system of community sentences, and that it might be worth developing youth justice initiatives such as reparation and referral orders.

The average cost of a prison place is about £26,000 a year, whereas a community sentence costs, on average, about £2,600 to supervise. There is therefore scope for putting more resources into community sentences, given the savings that could be made on prison places.

I believe that a new concentration on rehabilitation throughout the criminal justice system—and especially in prisons—is an essential component in the Government's determination to cut crime and create peaceful communities where people are comfortable and at ease with themselves. Without that new concentration, all the best efforts to make really significant inroads into the crime culture will fail, and the disaffection of crime-creating, excluded communities, made up of what might be called multi-problem people who are persistent offenders, will remain a blight on our society.

I am confident that the Government have the will to tackle those fundamental problems, and I look forward to progress being made over the lifetime of this Parliament. I trust that the good work that has been begun will focus on rehabilitation and better community sentencing, because I believe that that is an essential part of the process.

9.19 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Today's debate has been a full one. Right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House have made constructive contributions to a debate that has focused on law and order and the constitution.

As this is the conclusion of the full debate on the Queen's Speech, I will not do what I normally do in a winding-up speech and touch on everything that has been said, but I would like to pay tribute to all right hon. and hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches tonight. We have all been very impressed by what we have heard. Those giving them have spoken with great knowledge and warmth about their constituency and their predecessor. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for North-West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham), for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field), and for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Derek Conway), and the hon. Members for Southport (Dr. Pugh), for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Harris), for Belfast, North (Mr. Dodds), for Caerphilly (Mr. David), for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (John Thurso), for Gloucester (Mr. Dhandu) and for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman).

I should also like to mention the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), who was not making his maiden speech. Any Member unfortunate enough to have to deal with a case of violent crime in his or her constituency—as happens now and then—knows only too well what a harrowing experience it is. Obviously, it changes the lives of the individuals concerned, but the whole community is affected. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East for his contribution to the debate. He has had to deal with the Bulger case for some years now, and we can all sympathise with the responsibility that that has put on him as a constituency Member of Parliament.

I wish to conclude our debate by referring to constitutional matters. Part of the amendment before the House in the name of the official Opposition deals with

[Mrs. Angela Browning]

constitutional matters. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) spoke on law and order with her usual conviction and knowledge. However, I wish to focus my remarks on the constitutional part of the Gracious Speech, a matter that has been picked up by many right hon. and hon. Members.

In another place on 21 June, the Lord Chancellor opened the debate on the Gracious Speech and spoke specifically on constitutional matters. It is appropriate, perhaps, that we form two bookends—the Lord Chancellor started the debate on the Gracious Speech with this subject, and I am pleased to conclude it in the same way.

The Lord Chancellor justified the constitutional reforms of the Government in the previous Parliament. He stated:

"Our programme of constitutional reform was designed to increase public engagement in democracy and to regenerate our national identity by strengthening what is best about Britain.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 June 2001; Vol. 626, c. 46.]

I call the Labour party to account on that statement. The people of this country have given the Government a second chance to prove that they can deliver on matters such as public services, which have been the subject of a great deal of debate during the past few days, and the Government can certainly say that they have delivered with regard to the changes made to our national constitution in the previous Parliament.

The changes were contained in some of the earliest Bills produced in the previous Parliament. They were put through without thought or consideration, and they have changed the constitution of this country irrevocably. That is why the further changes that are proposed in this Parliament should be of great concern to all right hon. and hon. Members.

Members of Parliament should take it as a personal duty to ensure that constitutional changes, particularly those that affect the procedures and workings of this Chamber and another place, do not undermine the rights—particularly in this Chamber—of democratically elected Members to challenge the Executive; and to ensure that, nationally, our democratic process allows the voters to continue to influence our democracy through the ballot box. Anything that undermines that process should affect all Members, regardless of which party they were elected for at a general election.

Much concern has been expressed about the turnout at the election—59.4 per cent, which is the lowest since 1918. Many Members on both sides of the House have said that the House must consider carefully why the general public are so disinterested—cynical, perhaps—about our proceedings and about the very heart of democracy. It is incumbent upon all of us to rectify that.

I have heard Labour Members argue that the low turnout was due to the fact that people are so satisfied with the way the Government performed in the past four years that they had nothing to complain about and got on with watering the plants instead of going to the polling station. I question that argument. Indeed, I am sure that the Prime Minister himself would do so, as the tone of much of the debate in the few days since the Gracious Speech has been about the second chance and the need to deliver on promises that were made in the last Parliament.

The failure of any Government to deliver and to fulfil expectations raised has an impact on the way in which people perceive the proceedings of this place and on

whether they think that they are engaged in the democratic process. However, it goes beyond that, and there is no single reason why so few people came out to vote. People have become cynical about politics in general and about this national Parliament in particular.

There is a sense of urgency now. All parliamentarians must—in the way we conduct our business and conduct ourselves as individuals and collectively as political parties—put right some of the damage that has been done. If we do not do so, the people of this country will no longer feel that our democratic system serves its purpose—which is that we, as democratically elected representatives, can be dismissed or re-elected every four or five years. That process is painful for some of us, but it puts the power in the hands of the electorate. Any democratic system that is worthy of the name has to be strong and ensure that the power always remains ultimately in the hands of the electorate, who elect us or choose for whatever reason not to do so.

We heard some anecdotes, in particular in the maiden speeches, about things that had been said during the campaign. I was particularly moved by the contribution from the hon. Member for Gloucester (Mr. Dhanda), who had had comments made to him that I am sure we all found distressing. Let us hope that people become more enlightened and educated so that they do not say such ignorant things in future.

All parliamentarians are used to the public saying and doing things that can be wounding. I am pleased to say that my general election campaign was gloriously victorious—I almost trebled my majority with a very respectable turnout in Tiverton and Honiton—but when one of my constituents was asked whether he would vote Conservative he said, "No, I'm voting tactically to get that Edwina Currie out." That was very wounding.

The Lord Chancellor opened the Queen's Speech debate for the Government in another place and spelled out some of the issues that would be constitutionally important in this Parliament. In a moment I will deal with those constitutional matters that are printed on the face of the Gracious Speech, but it is of great concern that the Lord Chancellor should raise as a priority constitutional matters that are not even in the speech. I raise this tonight in the hope that the Leader of the House may be able to enlighten the House with the full agenda for constitutional change that the Government obviously have in mind, but have not necessarily disclosed in the Gracious Speech.

There was nothing in the Gracious Speech to say what the Government intended to do about sorting out the mess that was left behind following devolution in Scotland. That was mentioned in another place, when the Lord Chancellor said:

"Devolution does not signal antagonistic confrontation"—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 June 2001; Vol. 626, c. 46.]

Obviously, however, there will be antagonistic confrontation unless fairness is introduced as between Scotland and England, and to the way in which Scotland is represented in this place, and unless we take action on the way in which MPs representing Scotland are allowed to continue to vote on matters that are quite clearly, as far as primary legislation is concerned, matters for England and Wales alone.

I hope that the Leader of the House will tell us that, under his stewardship, we can expect that injustice to be

put right in this Parliament. I know that I am addressing the right person in the Cabinet, because I remind him of his words when he said that

"it would be wrong for those of us from Scotland to . . . interfere in English domestic affairs after that watershed"—

he was referring to devolution—

"has been reached."—[*Official Report*, 1 February 1977; Vol. 925, c. 457.]

So on a point of principle the Leader of the House is clearly signed up to the fact that there has to be fairness in the way in which devolution is arranged. It is a done deal now. The official Opposition accept that there is a Scottish Parliament. There is no suggestion that we would seek to revoke that. However, there must be fairness for the rest of the country as well, because this is unfinished business. I hope that the fact that the Lord Chancellor mentioned it in another place means that the Leader of the House will tell us tonight exactly how the Government will put that right.

Another very important constitutional issue that was not mentioned in the Queen's Speech or in anything that we have heard in the Chamber during the debate on the Loyal Address, concerns English regional assemblies. The Prime Minister said earlier today, in response to an oral question, that the people would decide about regional government for England, so I wonder why there is no proposal on the table, and certainly no mention of it in the speech, because many issues surrounding the regional government proposals for England remain.

What is the future of the democratically elected county council structure in England? The Lord Chancellor described the English regions as distinct parts. They are not distinct parts; they are parts of England, drawn on a map with an arbitrary line, created not because those regions have anything in terms of commonality, but simply because they suit a political agenda. The agenda is to chop England up into bite-sized chunks. How much easier it would be for a Prime Minister, if we had such a Prime Minister, to see off each little chunk of England one at a time than to see off the collective voice of England represented in the Chamber, ready to hold the Government to account, which is what this Parliament is for.

I hope that, when the Leader of the House gets to his feet in a moment, he will be able to share with us his response to those errors in, and omissions from, the Gracious Speech, which received a great deal of attention and comment in another place.

Will the Leader of the House respond to another issue that is mentioned in our amendment? Will he explain why, if the Government believe that it is the people who should have the final say, one of the biggest constitutional issues that the House will deal with this Session, and which we suspect will be dealt with very soon—the ratification of the treaty of Nice—is not to be subject to a referendum of the people? If the people are to be trusted, why cannot this big constitutional change be put to a referendum of the people, as big constitutional matters should be?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): Game, set and match.

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman says that from a sedentary position—and it is certainly true in the Republic

of Ireland, where the people have spoken. Despite the fact that they have spoken, it is clear that their voice will be suppressed, not by any democratic body that they have elected, but by an unelected, undemocratic body in Brussels. I should like the Leader of the House to tell us why we should not have a referendum on the Nice treaty.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Will the hon. Lady remind the House of how she voted when the Liberal Democrats suggested that the Maastricht treaty should be put to a referendum?

Mrs. Browning: I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that, when I fought the 1992 election—[*Interruption.*] Liberal Members should not be so rude. When I fought the 1992 election, the Maastricht treaty had been signed, with some very important opt-outs which the hon. Gentleman would willingly embrace, such as those on the social chapter and the single currency. I accepted in good faith that that was the best deal at the time. Since being elected to the House, I have become very suspicious of all deals cobbled together in Brussels. On a point of principle, I would be in favour of referendums on all major constitutional issues. I had thought that that was Liberal Democrat policy, but perhaps they have also changed their minds.

Simon Hughes indicated assent.

Mr. Tyler indicated assent.

Mrs. Browning: Oh, they agree with me. We know that they are trying to be the official Opposition, but it is no good their intervening on matters about which they agree.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: I shall give way very briefly, but I was not impressed with the right hon. Gentleman's contribution on the first day of debate on the Gracious Speech. If I give way to him, I hope that his intervention will not be acerbic, rude or pointless.

Mr. Kaufman: My gosh, that has slain me.

Mrs. Browning rose—

Mr. Kaufman: What was the hon. Lady's view when Margaret Thatcher guillotined the Single European Act through the House, without even allowing a right to debate it properly here, let alone a referendum?

Mrs. Browning: I was not a Member then; I am much younger than the right hon. Gentleman thinks.

I should like to refer to some of the other changes that we face in this Chamber and elsewhere. The Gracious Speech states that the Government intend to introduce legislation to implement the second phase of what they describe as House of Lords reform, following consultation. I have to tell the Leader of the House, who is new to his post and so may not be fully up to speed with such matters—[*Interruption.*] That is not a personal slight; he has only just been promoted, so he has inherited the proposals.

[Mrs. Browning]

In the previous Parliament, the leader of the Conservative party in the House of Lords and I met the right hon. Gentleman's predecessor and the then leader of the Labour party in the Lords to seek to fulfil their pledge to set up a cross-party committee of both Houses to consider the second phase of House of Lords reform. We in the Conservative party made it clear in the House that we were willing to engage in that process, but I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman's predecessor and the then Leader of the House of Lords not only declined to fulfil their own promises, but declined take us up on our offer, because they would not allow the committee to discuss the composition of the House of Lords in phase two.

The Government were very happy for the committee to debate things such as guillotining and similar arbitrary changes to the procedures in the Lords, such as those that were imposed on this House in the last Parliament, but despite their pledge they were unwilling to let that committee discuss the composition of the House of Lords in phase two. I must tell the Leader that if the words "following consultation" in the Queen's Speech are to mean anything, the consultation must be wide-reaching, genuine, and embracing of both Houses and all parties.

Of course, the fear is that the Government will impose on us their wish for the composition of the Lords. We have heard the proposal to get rid of the hereditaries. We have had a vast number of people added to the Lords—245 have been appointed in the past four years. The Government have not said anything about dealing with that aspect of the composition of the Lords.

I shall have something to say tomorrow in a much longer debate about the procedures of the House and the way in which they have been hijacked by the Executive. I shall leave those comments until tomorrow, in the hope that the Leader of the House can answer some of the questions that I have put to him tonight.

9.40 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): I begin by putting it on record that 39 speeches have been made by new Members and a few old Members who have been enjoying a sabbatical from the House. Some angst has been expressed today about the standing of Parliament, but I hope that I shall carry the whole House with me if I make the positive conclusion that the high quality of the maiden speeches made in the debates on the Queen's Speech and the calibre of new hon. Members are good grounds for optimism about the future of the House. I warmly welcome the hon. Members for Southport (Dr. Pugh), for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field), for Belfast, North (Mr. Dodds) and for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman) and my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Harris), for Caerphilly (Mr. David) and for Gloucester (Mr. Dhanda). I congratulate them on their well-expressed tributes to the constituents who sent them here and to their predecessors. As it is evident that it gave him so much pleasure, I hope that the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (John Thurso) will accept my congratulations on being disenobled and joining us as a born-again commoner.

The hon. Member for North-West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham) has returned from a sabbatical. I think that we have a sufficient majority for me to be

magnanimous enough to congratulate him on his return. I am not entirely convinced that he correctly paraphrased the Prime Minister's comments on "Question Time", and it is important that we get it straight, as I am aware that one of the hon. Gentleman's distant ancestors carried out the only assassination of a Prime Minister, when he shot Spencer Perceval. I would not want there to be a repetition through any misunderstanding.

I took the precaution of looking up the speech made by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) in reply to this debate last year. I was entertained to see that she finished by saying that the best thing about that year's Queen's Speech debate was that it brought the Tory party six days closer to the general election. It is a sentiment which in retrospect she may wish she had phrased differently.

Today, the right hon. Lady made a sustained plea for modernisation of the constitution. In a spirit of friendship and willingness to enter into common endeavour with her, I should say that her pleas would have carried more authority if just once she had acknowledged the state of the constitution that the Conservatives left behind four years ago. It was the only constitution in the democratic world that allowed the hereditary principle to determine who controlled one of two Chambers of Parliament. It was one of the most centralised constitutions in Europe and we had one of the most secretive of democratic states. The public had no right to know information held by the Government elected by the public.

As a Member of Parliament who served in the House for every one of the 18 years that the Conservative party was in power, I have difficulty sharing the rosy glow with which the right hon. Lady appears to recall that period as the golden age of parliamentary democracy. The Conservatives may have forgotten it, but the nation has not forgotten the poll tax, which symbolised all that was rotten in the constitution at the time. The measure was forced through the House by Government Whips, despite opposition from every other party and from most of their own Members. It was pushed through the House of Lords on the back of the hereditary vote. One Member of the other place was flown back for the day from his residence in Monte Carlo, where he did not have to pay the poll tax in any case.

The poll tax was first imposed on the people of Scotland, who had not voted for a Tory Government at any price. I do not recall it entering the heads of Conservative Members that it would be unfair for Tory Members of Parliament to impose the poll tax on Scottish people who had not voted for it. Any constitution that permitted such a monumental mistake as the poll tax was one demanding a thorough overhaul.

I agree with the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton that the Government have delivered on radical reform of the constitution. We are proud of that. The people of Scotland and Wales have their own Parliament and Assembly to decide for themselves how to run their public services. I remind her that the Conservative party is only represented in those bodies because we introduced a voting system that is fair to parties which otherwise would be endangered species.

We introduced the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which gives the public the right to the information in millions of documents that were previously kept from them. In addition, we have broken with the hereditary

principle in the House of Lords. Of course more needs to be done—not that the Conservatives ever attempted to do it while they were in office.

The Opposition's amendment demands a referendum on the Nice treaty. That is from a party that took Britain into the European Community without a referendum; accepted sweeping increases in majority voting as the price of the single market without a referendum; and signed up to the Maastricht treaty without a referendum. In all the Conservatives' long years in office, they never once gave the British people a referendum on anything. They did, however, claim that they were going to make the election a referendum on Europe—and they lost catastrophically. If I understand them right, the Conservatives are going to claim that, although they might have lost that referendum in the United Kingdom, they won in Ireland.

If the Conservatives want to be taken seriously when they promise to learn from the lessons of defeat, they cannot ring-fence their party prejudices about Europe from the learning process. A good starting point for their rethink could be the Nice treaty. It gives Britain a larger vote than it ever had in the Conservative years and, for the first time, sets out the votes of the candidate countries that are queuing up to become members of the EU even as Conservative Members develop second thoughts. If they cannot support even that modest measure, they are refusing to learn one of the key lessons of the election—that the British public have enough common sense to reject a party that prides itself on offering isolation, rather than influence, in Europe.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: I cannot resist, although this is probably the only time that I can give way.

Sir Peter Tapsell: How can the right hon. Gentleman describe as a modest measure a treaty in which we give up 34 areas of our national veto?

Mr. Cook: For a start, we have already opted out of about 10 of those because we are not part of Schengen. Others relate to matters of such triviality as the pension arrangements for court officials. Some, however, are important, and we fought for those at Nice, including the measure to get rid of the French veto on protectionism and trade. If the hon. Gentleman wants to restore that veto to France, it will be welcomed in Paris and rejected throughout the rest of Europe, including at Westminster.

I cannot help the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton with a referendum on the Nice treaty, but I hope that I can work with her and all hon. Members on the reform of Parliament. There is a big job to be done to complete the reform of the House of Lords to make it a more representative second Chamber. I am grateful for the hon. Lady's helpful advice on the background to that.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) asked for consultation before we proceed. The Queen's Speech promised that there would be further consultation. It must, of course, include both Houses, because any change to the status of the House of Lords plainly has big implications for the House of Commons. However, I assure the hon. Member

for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, who speaks with personal authority on the issue, that we have no intention of allowing consultation to obstruct reform if it does not produce consensus.

I hope that we will be able to build consensus on modernisation of the Commons. As Leader of the House, I shall seek support in all quarters for two important objectives of modernisation. The first is to enable the House to hold the Government to account and to scrutinise their Executive decisions and legislation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood) reminded us, good scrutiny makes for good government.

Hon. Members of all parties have urged on me that the highest priority is to get the Select Committees restarted. My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) asked during this debate for them to be set up before the House rises for the summer recess. His request carries extra force as he has voluntarily given up a career on the ministerial Bench to return to one of the Select Committees.

Mr. Cash: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: I am afraid that I must make progress.

Mr. Cash rose—

Mr. Cook: I am pleased to say to my hon. Friend, and to the hon. Gentleman if he will allow me to continue, that it is my intention to enable Select Committees to be set up in the week beginning 16 July. That is only four weeks after the Queen's Speech and reflects a faster timetable for setting up Select Committees than in any previous Parliament. I also propose to increase the discretion of Select Committees by enabling them to decide for themselves whether they should appoint sub-Committees rather than having that decision imposed on them.

The second objective of modernisation must be to ensure that the hours and working methods of this House belong to the same century in which most of our constituents live and work. On Monday, the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made an intervention in a new, soft focus, socially inclusive mode. I would not wish to discourage him from the challenging process of reinventing himself as a social Liberal, but I am not sure that I did not prefer him as his former robust and brutal self.

On Monday, the hon. Gentleman made a memorable appeal for more women Tory Members of Parliament. If he really wants more women to come forward as MPs, there are two steps that he and his colleagues can take. [HON. MEMBERS: "Resign."] Well, there is a third step, but I was not going to be that brutal and robust.

First, the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues could support the Bill in the Queen's Speech to permit positive measures for the selection of women as candidates. Secondly, they must support procedures in this House that make it easier for a woman to be both a mother and a Member of Parliament at the same time. If length of sitting hours were a test of scrutiny, this House would pass with an alpha plus, because we sit for longer than any other democratic Parliament. Wasting the time of the House should not be confused with effective scrutiny.

Mrs. Browning: If women in this place are to be taken as professional and serious in the job of Member of

[Mrs. Browning]

Parliament, why are the Government not proposing that, for example, women serving as officers in the armed forces, women barristers and others also work nine to five so that they can get home to cook the fish fingers? [Interruption.]

Mr. Cook: As one of my women colleagues shouted during the hon. Lady's intervention, no Member and no woman Member is suggesting that we should sit from nine to five. However, it does not seem entirely unreasonable that we should allow colleagues to go home at 10 o'clock at night. Members of any other profession would regard that as a very minimum working condition.

Elections put a great obligation on those of us who are victors. We must always remember that we secured the trust of the people because they expected us to deliver what we promised: economic opportunity for working families and their children, quality public services on which they can rely, security in their homes and safety on their streets.

We want to liberate the talents and energy of the British people. We want to widen the opportunities for those who get on by working hard. That is why the Queen's Speech includes an enterprise Bill, which will promote enterprise by sharpening competition and by helping small businesses to come back from bankruptcy. That is why the Queen's Speech widens access to high-quality education.

When the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) opened the debate, she spoke with feeling about the problems of real life on deprived estates. One of the factors that perpetuate such deprivation is the low educational expectation of families in such neighbourhoods. We must not accept that children in areas of social deprivation should put up with poorer standards at their schools and poorer opportunities to gain qualifications and skills. That is why the Queen's Speech commits us to an education Bill that will widen the diversity of schools and push up standards for all our children; whatever their family background and wherever their home.

We are committed to opportunity for all who can take it, but we intend to parallel that with security for all who need it. That is why the Queen's Speech included a pension credit Bill—a Bill that will reward those pensioners who have saved for their old age, rather than penalising them for having done so. During the debate on the Queen's Speech, I have heard that Bill denounced by the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman as extending the indignity of means testing. That is a rich piece of effrontery from the party which during more than 18 years in power made the means tests progressively more mean, until they had stripped away housing benefit, council tax benefit and any other benefit from any pensioner with a little bit more than income support. How dare the Conservatives now accuse us of imposing the indignity of the means test on pensioners, when we are giving back to pensioners some of the help of which they robbed them?

In her opening speech, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald made a memorable plea to her party to serve not only the god of public spending cuts. That is the sort of line that makes many Labour Members hope that, even at this late stage in the proceedings, her party will be big enough to find a place for her in its

leadership election. If we are to have a world-class health service, we need investment, not spending cuts. That is why the NHS is now benefiting from the biggest hospital building programme it has ever known.

However, investment alone is not enough. We must make sure that the investment is put to best use. That is why the Queen's Speech includes an NHS reform Bill—a Bill that will shift the centre of gravity in the NHS from Whitehall to those in the front line who are closer to patients' needs and patients' wishes.

Mr. Cash: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I hope that it really is a point of order.

Mr. Cash: It is, Mr. Speaker. Twice during the course of this debate the Deputy Speakers have drawn attention to the fact that the subject of public services is not regarded as being within the purview of the debate. I should be grateful if you ruled on that point.

Mr. Speaker: I knew that the hon. Gentleman did not really have a point of order. The Leader of the House is entitled to go over all the debates that have taken place in the past few days. His rights are different from those of Back Benchers in these circumstances.

Mr. Leigh: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I have already explained the position.

Mr. Leigh: During an earlier speech, Mr. Speaker, your deputy made it absolutely clear that we had to stick to the terms of the amendment and that we could not speak on health and education. Why is there one rule for the Leader of the House and another for Back Benchers?

Mr. Speaker: Both winding-up speakers are entitled to go wider than any Back Benchers. That is a long-standing tradition of the House.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentlemen, Mr. Speaker, because I could not have demonstrated better than they have how little the Opposition want to hear about what we are going to do for the health service.

When launching his leadership bid, the shadow Chancellor admitted that in response to two disastrous defeats, his party

"needs to develop a much better understanding of the problems of education and health".

We are happy to co-operate with the Conservatives to give them all the time they need in opposition to develop that better understanding. In the meantime, we will get on with implementing the policies that won Labour victory.

We will carry through the commitments of the Queen's Speech: a quality health service, world-class standards and skills in our schools, and a fair society that offers opportunity to youth and dignity to age. That is what this Government intend to deliver. That is what Britain voted for last month. That is what Labour Members will vote for in the Lobby tonight.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 150, Noes 403.

Division No. 2]

[9.59 pm

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter (*E Surrey*)
 Amess, David
 Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
 Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
 Bacon, Richard
 Baldry, Tony
 Barker, Greg
 Baron, John
 Bellingham, Henry
 Berrow, John
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boswell, Tim
 Bottomley, Peter (*Worthing W*)
 Brady, Graham
 Brazier, Julian
 Browning, Mrs Angela
 Burns, Simon
 Burt, Alistair
 Cameron, David
 Cash, William
 Chope, Christopher
 Clappison, James
 Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth
 (*Rushcliffe*)
 Collins, Tim
 Conway, Derek
 Cormack, Sir Patrick
 Cran, James
 Curry, Rt Hon David
 Davis, Rt Hon David (*Haltemprice*)
 Djanogly, Jonathan
 Duncan, Alan
 Duncan Smith, Iain
 Duncan, Peter
 Evans, Nigel
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, Michael
 Field, Mark (*Cities of London*)
 Flight, Howard
 Flook, Adrian
 Forth, Rt Hon Eric
 Fox, Dr Liam
 Francois, Mark
 Gale, Roger
 Gamier, Edward
 Gibb, Nick
 Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
 Goodman, Paul
 Gray, James
 Grayling, Chris
 Green, Damian (*Ashford*)
 Greenway, John
 Grieve, Dominic
 Gummer, Rt Hon John
 Hague, Rt Hon William
 Hammond, Philip
 Hawkins, Nick
 Hayes, John
 Heald, Oliver
 Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
 Hendry, Charles
 Hoban, Mark
 Horam, John
 Howard, Rt Hon Michael
 Howarth, Gerald (*Aldershot*)
 Hunter, Andrew
 Jack, Rt Hon Michael
 Jenkin, Bernard
 Johnson, Boris (*Hanley*)

Key, Robert
 Kirkbride, Miss Julie
 Knight, Rt Hon Greg (*E Yorkshire*)
 Lait, Mrs Jacqui
 Lansley, Andrew
 Leigh, Edward
 Letwin, Oliver
 Lewis, Dr Julian (*New Forest E*)
 Liddell-Grainger, Ian
 Liddington, David
 Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
 Loughton, Tim
 Luff, Peter
 McIntosh, Miss Anne
 MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
 Maclean, Rt Hon David
 McLoughlin, Patrick
 Malins, Humfrey
 Maples, John
 Mates, Michael
 Maude, Rt Hon Francis
 Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
 May, Mrs Theresa
 Mercer, Patrick
 Mitchell, Andrew (*Sutton Coldfield*)
 Moss, Malcolm
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Norman, Archie
 O'Brien, Stephen (*Eddisbury*)
 Osborne, George (*Tatton*)
 Ottaway, Richard
 Page, Richard
 Paice, James
 Paterson, Owen
 Pickles, Eric
 Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
 Prisk, Mark
 Randall, John
 Redwood, Rt Hon John
 Robathan, Andrew
 Robertson, Hugh (*Faversham*)
 Robertson, Laurence (*Tewk'bury*)
 Roe, Mrs Marion
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sayeed, Jonathan
 Selous, Andrew
 Shephard, Richard
 Simmonds, Mark
 Simpson, Keith (*Mid-Norfolk*)
 Smyth, Rev Martin (*Belfast S*)
 Soames, Nicholas
 Spelman, Mrs Caroline
 Spicer, Sir Michael
 Spink, Dr Robert
 Spring, Richard
 Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
 Steen, Anthony
 Streeter, Gary
 Swayne, Desmond
 Swire, Hugo
 Syms, Robert
 Tapsell, Sir Peter
 Taylor, Ian (*Esher & Walton*)
 Taylor, John (*Solihull*)
 Taylor, Sir Teddy
 Tredinnick, David
 Trend, Michael
 Turner, Andrew (*Isle of Wight*)
 Tyrie, Andrew

Viggers, Peter
 Walter, Robert
 Waterson, Nigel
 Watkinson, Angela
 Whittingdale, John
 Widdicombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wilkinson, John

Willetts, David
 Winterton, Mrs Ann (*Congleton*)
 Winterton, Nicholas (*Macclesfield*)
 Yeo, Tim
 Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:

Mr. Peter Atkinson and
 Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
 Adams, Mrs Irene (*Paisley N*)
 Ainger, Nick
 Ainsworth, Bob (*Cov'try NE*)
 Alexander, Douglas
 Allan, Richard
 Allen, Graham
 Anderson, Janet (*Rossendale*)
 Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
 Atherton, Ms Candy
 Atkins, Charlotte
 Austin, John
 Bailey, Adrian
 Baird, Vera
 Baker, Norman
 Banks, Tony
 Barnes, Harry
 Barrett, John
 Barron, Kevin
 Battle, John
 Bayley, Hugh
 Beard, Nigel
 Begg, Miss Anne
 Belth, Rt Hon A J
 Bell, Stuart
 Benn, Hilary
 Bennett, Andrew
 Benton, Joe
 Berry, Roger
 Best, Harold
 Betts, Clive
 Blackman, Liz
 Blears, Ms Hazel
 Blizzard, Bob
 Blunkett, Rt Hon David
 Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
 Borrow, David
 Bradley, Rt Hon Keith (*Withington*)
 Bradley, Peter (*The Wrekin*)
 Bradshaw, Ben
 Brake, Tom
 Breed, Colin
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brinton, Mrs Helen
 Brooke, Annette
 Brown, Rt Hon Gordon
 (*Dunfermline E*)
 Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas
 (*Newcastle E & Wallsend*)
 Brown, Russell (*Dumfries*)
 Browne, Desmond
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Colin
 Burnett, John
 Burnham, Andy
 Burstow, Paul
 Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
 Cable, Dr Vincent
 Cabor, Rt Hon Richard
 Cairns, David
 Calton, Patsy
 Campbell, Alan (*Tynemouth*)
 Campbell, Mrs Anne (*C'bridge*)

Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies
 (*NE Fife*)
 Campbell, Ronnie (*Blyth V*)
 Caplin, Ivor
 Carmichael, Alistair
 Casale, Roger
 Caton, Martin
 Cawsey, Ian
 Challen, Colin
 Chapman, Ben (*Wirral S*)
 Chaytor, David
 Chidgey, David
 Clapham, Michael
 Clark, Dr Lynda
 (*Edinburgh Pentlands*)
 Clarke, Rt Hon Tom (*Coatbridge*)
 Clarke, Tony (*Northampton S*)
 Clelland, David
 Clwyd, Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ms Ann
 Coleman, Iain
 Colman, Tony
 Connarty, Michael
 Cook, Rt Hon Robin (*Livingston*)
 Cooper, Yvette
 Corbyn, Jeremy
 Corston, Jean
 Cotter, Brian
 Cousins, Jim
 Cranston, Ross
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John (*Hornchurch*)
 Cunningham, Jim (*Cov'try S*)
 Cunningham, Tony (*Workington*)
 Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
 Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
 Davey, Edward (*Kingston*)
 Davey, Valerie (*Bristol W*)
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Rt Hon Denzil (*Llanelli*)
 Davies, Geraint (*Croydon C*)
 Dawson, Hilion
 Dean, Mrs Janet
 Dhanda, Parnjit
 Dobbin, Jim
 Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
 Dodds, Nigel
 Doughty, Sue
 Dowd, Jim
 Drown, Ms Julia
 Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
 Eagle, Angela (*Walsley*)
 Eagle, Maria (*L'pool Garston*)
 Efford, Clive
 Eilman, Mrs Louise
 Ennis, Jeff
 Ewing, Annabelle
 Farrelly, Paul
 Field, Rt Hon Frank (*Birkenhead*)
 Fisher, Mark
 Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
 Flint, Caroline
 Foster, Rt Hon Derek
 Foster, Don (*Bath*)

- Foster, Michael (Worcester)
 Foster, Michael Jabez (Hastings)
 Francis, Dr Hywel
 Galloway, George
 Gapes, Mike
 George, Andrew (St Ives)
 Gibson, Dr Ian
 Gidley, Sandra
 Gilroy, Linda
 Godsiff, Roger
 Goggins, Paul
 Green, Matthew (Ludlow)
 Griffiths, Jane (Reading E)
 Griffiths, Nigel (Edinburgh S)
 Griffiths, Win (Bridgend)
 Grogan, John
 Hain, Peter
 Hall, Mike (Wolverhampton)
 Hall, Patrick (Bedford)
 Hamilton, David (Midlothian)
 Hamilton, Fabian (Leeds NE)
 Hanson, David
 Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
 Harris, Dr Evan (Oxford W)
 Harris, Tom (Glasgow Cathcart)
 Harvey, Nick
 Havard, Dai
 Healey, John
 Heath, David
 Henderson, Ivan (Harwich)
 Hendrick, Mark
 Heppell, John
 Hesford, Stephen
 Hewitt, Rt Hon Ms Patricia
 Heyes, David
 Hill, Keith
 Hinchcliffe, David
 Hodge, Margaret
 Hoey, Kate
 Holmes, Paul
 Hood, Jimmy
 Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
 Hope, Phil
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, Rt Hon Alan (Newport E)
 Howarth, George (Knowsley N)
 Howells, Dr Kim
 Hoyle, Lindsay
 Hughes, Beverley (Stretford)
 Hughes, Kevin (Doncaster N)
 Hughes, Simon (Southwark N)
 Humble, Mrs Joan
 Hurst, Alan
 Hutton, John
 Iddon, Dr Brian
 Illsley, Eric
 Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
 Jackson, Helen (Hillsborough)
 Jamieson, David
 Jenkins, Brian
 Johnson, Alan (Hull W & Hessle)
 Johnson, Miss Melanie (Welwyn Hatfield)
 Jones, Helen (Warrington N)
 Jones, Jon Owen (Cardiff C)
 Jones, Kevan (N Durham)
 Jones, Lynne (Selly Oak)
 Jones, Martyn (Clwyd S)
 Jones, Nigel (Cheltenham)
 Jowell, Rt Hon Tessa
 Joyce, Eric
 Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
 Keeble, Ms Sally
 Keen, Alan (Feltham & Heston)
 Keen, Ann (Brentford & Isleworth)
 Keetch, Paul
 Kemp, Fraser
 Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles (Ross Skye & Inverness W)
 Khabra, Piana S
 Kidney, David
 Kilfoyle, Peter
 King, Andy (Rugby & Kenilworth)
 King, Ms Oona (Bethnal Green)
 Kirkwood, Archy
 Knight, Jim (S Dorset)
 Kumar, Dr Ashok
 Ladyman, Dr Stephen
 Lamb, Norman
 Lammy, David
 Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
 Laws, David
 Laxton, Bob
 Lazarowicz, Mark
 Lepper, David
 Leslie, Christopher
 Levitt, Tom
 Lewis, Ivan (Bury S)
 Lewis, Terry (Worsley)
 Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
 Linton, Martin
 Lloyd, Tony
 Lhwyd, Elyn
 Love, Andrew
 Lucas, Ian
 Luke, Iain
 Lyons, John
 McAvoy, Thomas
 McCabe, Stephen
 McCartney, Rt Hon Ian
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 MacDonald, Calum
 McDonnell, John
 McFall, John
 McGuire, Mrs Anne
 McIsaac, Shona
 McKechnie, Ann
 McKenna, Rosemary
 Mackinlay, Andrew
 Mactaggart, Fiona
 McWalter, Tony
 McWilliam, John
 Mahmood, Khalid
 Mahon, Mrs Alice
 Mallaber, Judy
 Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Gordon (Blackpool S)
 Marsden, Paul (Shrewsbury)
 Marshall, David (Sheffield S)
 Marshall, Jim (Leicester S)
 Marshall-Andrews, Robert
 Martlew, Eric
 Merron, Gillian
 Miliband, David
 Miller, Andrew
 Mitchell, Austin (Gt Grimsby)
 Moffatt, Laura
 Moore, Michael
 Moran, Margaret
 Morgan, Julie
 Morley, Elliot
 Morris, Rt Hon Estelle
 Mountford, Kai
 Mudie, George
 Mullin, Chris
 Munn, Ms Meg
 Murphy, Jim (Eastwood)
 Murphy, Rt Hon Paul (Torfaen)
 Naysmith, Dr Doug
 Norris, Dan
 Oaten, Mark
 O'Brien, Bill (Normanton)
 O'Brien, Mike (N Warks)
 Olin, Bill
 O'Neill, Martin
 Opik, Lambit
 Organ, Diana
 Owen, Albert
 Palmer, Dr Nick
 Pearson, Ian
 Perham, Linda
 Picking, Anne
 Pickthall, Colin
 Pike, Peter
 Plaskitt, James
 Pond, Chris
 Pope, Greg
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Sir Raymond
 Prentice, Ms Bridget (Lewisham E)
 Prentice, Gordon (Pendle)
 Prosser, Gwyn
 Pugh, Dr John
 Purchase, Ken
 Purnell, James
 Quinn, Lawrie
 Rammell, Bill
 Rapson, Syd
 Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
 Reid, Alan (Argyll & Bute)
 Rendel, David
 Robertson, Angus (Moray)
 Robertson, John (Glasgow Anniesland)
 Robinson, Geoffrey (Covtry NW)
 Robinson, Iris (Strangford)
 Robinson, Peter (Belfast E)
 Rooney, Terry
 Ross, Ernie
 Ruane, Chris
 Ruddock, Joan
 Russell, Bob (Colchester)
 Russell, Ms Christine (Chester)
 Ryan, Joan
 Salmond, Alex
 Salter, Martin
 Sanders, Adrian
 Sarwar, Mohammad
 Savidge, Malcolm
 Sawford, Phil
 Sedgemore, Brian
 Shaw, Jonathan
 Sheridan, Jim
 Shipley, Ms Debra
 Simon, Siôn
 Simpson, Alan (Nottingham S)
 Skinner, Dennis
 Smith, Rt Hon Andrew (Oxford E)
 Smith, Angela (Basildon)
 Smith, Rt Hon Chris (Islington S)
 Smith, Jacqui (Redditch)
 Smith, Llew (Blaenau Gwent)
 Smith, Sir Robert (W Ab'rfans)
 Soley, Clive
 Southworth, Helen
 Squire, Rachel
 Starkey, Dr Phyllis
 Steinberg, Gerry
 Stevenson, George
 Stewart, David (Inverness E)
 Stewart, Ian (Eccles)
 Stinchcombe, Paul
 Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
 Straw, Rt Hon Jack
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Ms Gisela
 Stunell, Andrew
 Tami, Mark
 Taylor, Rt Hon Ann (Dewsbury)
 Taylor, Ms Dairi (Stockton S)
 Taylor, David (NW Leics)
 Taylor, Matthew (Truro)
 Taylor, Dr Richard (Wyre F)
 Thomas, Gareth (Clwyd W)
 Thomas, Gareth R (Harrow W)
 Thomas, Simon (Ceredigion)
 Thurso, John
 Tipping, Paddy
 Todd, Mark
 Tonge, Dr Jenny
 Tough, Don
 Trickett, Jon
 Truswell, Paul
 Turner, Dennis (Wolverhampton SE)
 Turner, Dr Desmond (Kemptown)
 Turner, Neil (Wigan)
 Twigg, Derek (Halton)
 Twigg, Stephen (Enfield)
 Tyler, Paul
 Tynan, Bill
 Walley, Ms Joan
 Ward, Ms Claire
 Wareing, Robert N
 Watson, Tom
 Watts, David
 Webb, Steve
 Weir, Michael
 White, Brian
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Wicks, Malcolm
 Williams, Rt Hon Alan (Swansea W)
 Williams, Mrs Betty (Conwy)
 Williams, Hywel (Caernarfon)
 Williams, Roger (Brecon)
 Willis, Phil
 Wilson, Brian
 Winnick, David
 Winterton, Ms Rosie (Doncaster C)
 Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Woodward, Shaun
 Woolas, Phil
 Worthington, Tony
 Wright, Anthony D (Gt Yarmouth)
 Wright, David (Telford)
 Wright, Tony (Cannock)
 Wyatt, Derek
 Younger-Ross, Richard
- Tellers for the Noes:**
 Mr. Tony McNulty and
 Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment proposed, at the end of the Question, to add:

"But humbly regret that the Gracious Speech fails to include any measures to address the problems faced by rural communities in the wake of the foot and mouth crisis or remove the bureaucracy stifling British agriculture and rural enterprise; are dismayed by the

Government's failure to place environmental concerns at the heart of its legislative programme, to address the crisis in our public transport system and to reform the basis for local government funding; believe that the Government's proposals for education will not adequately address the continuing crisis in teacher recruitment and retention; further believe that tuition fees remain the greatest bar to a university education for many; further believe that while reform of the criminal justice system is necessary, there is no justification for undermining fundamental civil liberties of our citizens, in particular their right to a fair trial; urge the establishment of a standing Royal Commission to report on policies dealing with all drugs; regret the continued failure of the Government to provide for referendums on a fair voting system for the House of Commons and the European Single Currency and to bring forward wide-ranging proposals for modernisation of both Houses of Parliament; regret the lack of provision for personal care for elderly and disabled people, and for preventive healthcare; and call on the Government to take bold steps to tackle the steep inequalities of opportunity and access to essential services which afflict the most disadvantaged members in society."—[Simon Hughes.]

Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 33 (Calling of amendments at end of debate), That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 57, Noes 344.

Division No. 3]

[10.14 pm

AYES

Allan, Richard
Baker, Norman
Barrett, John
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Annette
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Calton, Patsy
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies
(NE Fife)
Carmichael, Alistair
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward (Kingston)
Doughty, Sue
Ewing, Annabelle
Foster, Don (Bath)
George, Andrew (St Ives)
Gidley, Sandra
Green, Matthew (Ludlow)
Harris, Dr Evan (Oxford W)
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David
Holmes, Paul
Hughes, Simon (Southwark N)
Jones, Nigel (Cheltenham)
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles
(Ross Skye & Inverness W)

Kirkwood, Archy
Lamb, Norman
Laws, David
Lwyd, Elyn
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Opik, Lambit
Pugh, Dr John
Reid, Alan (Argyll & Bute)
Rendel, David
Robertson, Angus (Moray)
Russell, Bob (Colchester)
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Taylor, Matthew (Truro)
Taylor, Dr Richard (Wyre F)
Thomas, Simon (Ceredigion)
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Weir, Michael
Williams, Hywel (Caernarfon)
Williams, Roger (Brecon)
Willis, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:

Sir Robert Smith and
Mr. Andrew Stunell.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene (Paisley N)
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob (Cov'try NE)
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet (Rossendale)
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian

Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Baron, John
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe

Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Bleas, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Rt Hon Keith (Withington)
Bradley, Peter (The Wrekin)
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon
(Dunfermline E)
Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas
(Newcastle E & Wallsend)
Brown, Russell (Dumfries)
Browne, Desmond
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan (Tynemouth)
Campbell, Mrs Anne (C'bridge)
Campbell, Ronnie (Blyth V)
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben (Wirral S)
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda
(Edinburgh Pentlands)
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom (Coatbridge)
Clarke, Tony (Northampton S)
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin (Livingston)
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cran, James
Cranston, Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John (Hornchurch)
Cunningham, Jim (Cov'try S)
Cunningham, Tony (Workington)
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie (Bristol W)
David, Wayne
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil (Llanelli)
Davies, Geraint (Croydon C)
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhandia, Parmjit
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Dodds, Nigel
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth

Eagle, Angela (Wallasey)
Eagle, Maria (L'pool Garston)
Eford, Clive
Eliman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Rt Hon Frank (Birkenhead)
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael (Worcester)
Foster, Michael Jabez (Hastings)
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane (Reading E)
Griffiths, Nigel (Edinburgh S)
Griffiths, Win (Bridgend)
Grogan, John
Hall, Peter
Hall, Mike (Weaver Vale)
Hall, Patrick (Bedford)
Hamilton, David (Midlothian)
Hamilton, Fabian (Leeds NE)
Hanson, David
Hamman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom (Glasgow Cathcart)
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan (Harwich)
Hendrick, Mark
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Rt Hon Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan (Newport E)
Howarth, George (Knowsley N)
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Beverley (Stretford)
Hughes, Kevin (Doncaster N)
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illesley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen (Hillsborough)
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan (Hull W & Hessle)
Johnson, Miss Melanie
(Welwyn Hatfield)
Jones, Helen (Warrington N)
Jones, Jon Owen (Cardiff C)
Jones, Kevan (N Durham)
Jones, Lynne (Selly Oak)
Jones, Martyn (Clwyd S)
Jowell, Rt Hon Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan (Feltham & Heston)
Keen, Ann (Brentford & Isleworth)
Kemp, Fraser

Khabra, Piara S
 Kidney, David
 Kilfoyle, Peter
 King, Andy (*Rugby & Kenilworth*)
 King, Ms Oona (*Bethnal Green*)
 Knight, Jim (*S Dorset*)
 Kumar, Dr Ashok
 Ladyman, Dr Stephen
 Lammy, David
 Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
 Laxton, Bob
 Lazarowicz, Mark
 Lepper, David
 Leslie, Christopher
 Levitt, Tom
 Lewis, Ivan (*Bury S*)
 Lewis, Terry (*Worsley*)
 Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
 Linton, Martin
 Lloyd, Tony
 Love, Andrew
 Lucas, Ian
 Luke, Iain
 Lyons, John
 McAvooy, Thomas
 McCabe, Stephen
 McCartney, Rt Hon Ian
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 MacDonald, Calum
 McDonnell, John
 McFall, John
 McGuire, Mrs Anne
 McIsaac, Shona
 McKechin, Ann
 McKenna, Rosemary
 Mackinlay, Andrew
 MacLaggart, Fiona
 McWalter, Tony
 McWilliam, John
 Mahmood, Khalid
 Mahon, Mrs Alice
 Mallaber, Judy
 Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Gordon (*Blackpool S*)
 Marsden, Paul (*Shrewsbury*)
 Marshall, David (*Shettleston*)
 Marshall, Jim (*Leicester S*)
 Marshall-Andrews, Robert
 Martlew, Eric
 Merron, Gillian
 Miliband, David
 Miller, Andrew
 Mitchell, Austin (*Gt Grimsby*)
 Moffatt, Laura
 Moran, Margaret
 Morgan, Julie
 Morley, Elliot
 Morris, Rt Hon Estelle
 Mountford, Kali
 Mudie, George
 Mullin, Chris
 Munn, Ms Meg
 Murphy, Jim (*Eastwood*)
 Murphy, Rt Hon Paul (*Torfaen*)
 Naysmith, Dr Doug
 Norris, Dan
 O'Brien, Bill (*Normanton*)
 O'Brien, Mike (*N Works*)
 Oler, Bill
 O'Neill, Martin
 Organ, Diana
 Owen, Albert
 Palmer, Dr Nick
 Pearson, Ian

Perham, Linda
 Picking, Anne
 Pickthall, Colin
 Pike, Peter
 Plaskitt, James
 Porid, Chris
 Pope, Greg
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Sir Raymond
 Prentice, Ms Bridget (*Lewisham E*)
 Prentice, Gordon (*Pendle*)
 Prescott, Rt Hon John
 Prosser, Gwyn
 Purchase, Ken
 Purnell, James
 Quinn, Lawrie
 Rammell, Bill
 Rapson, Syd
 Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
 Robertson, John
 (*Glasgow Anniesland*)
 Robinson, Geoffrey (*Cov'try NW*)
 Robinson, Iris (*Strangford*)
 Robinson, Peter (*Belfast E*)
 Rooney, Terry
 Ross, Ernie
 Ruane, Chris
 Ruddock, Joan
 Russell, Ms Christine (*Chester*)
 Ryan, Joan
 Sarwar, Mohammad
 Savidge, Malcolm
 Sawford, Phil
 Sedgemore, Brian
 Shaw, Jonathan
 Sheridan, Jim
 Shipley, Ms Debra
 Simon, Siôn
 Simpson, Alan (*Nottingham S*)
 Skinner, Dennis
 Smith, Rt Hon Andrew (*Oxford E*)
 Smith, Angela (*Basildon*)
 Smith, Rt Hon Chris (*Islington S*)
 Smith, Jacqui (*Redditch*)
 Smith, Llew (*Blaenau Gwent*)
 Smyth, Rev Martin (*Belfast S*)
 Soley, Clive
 Southworth, Helen
 Squire, Rachel
 Starkey, Dr Phyllis
 Steinberg, Gerry
 Stevenson, George
 Stewart, David (*Inverness E*)
 Stewart, Ian (*Eccles*)
 Stinchcombe, Paul
 Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
 Straw, Rt Hon Jack
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Taylor, Rt Hon Ann (*Dewsbury*)
 Taylor, Ms Dari (*Stockton S*)
 Taylor, David (*NW Leics*)
 Thomas, Gareth (*Clwyd W*)
 Thomas, Gareth R (*Harrow W*)
 Tipping, Paddy
 Todd, Mark
 Toughig, Don
 Trickett, Jon
 Truswell, Paul
 Turner, Dennis (*Wolverhampton SE*)
 Turner, Dr Desmond (*Kempton*)
 Turner, Neil (*Wigan*)
 Twigg, Derek (*Halton*)
 Twigg, Stephen (*Enfield*)
 Tynan, Bill

Walley, Ms Joan
 Ward, Ms Claire
 Wareing, Robert N
 Watson, Tom
 Watts, David
 White, Brian
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Wicks, Malcolm
 Williams, Rt Hon Alan
 (*Swansea W*)
 Williams, Mrs Betty (*Conwy*)
 Wilson, Brian
 Winnick, David

Winterton, Ms Rosie (*Doncaster C*)
 Wood, Mike
 Woodward, Shaun
 Woolas, Phil
 Worthington, Tony
 Wright, Anthony D (*Gt Yarmouth*)
 Wright, David (*Telford*)
 Wright, Tony (*Cannock*)
 Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mr. Tony McNulty and
 Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 334, Noes 207.

Division No. 4]

[10.28 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
 Adams, Mrs Irene (*Paisley N*)
 Ainger, Nick
 Ainsworth, Bob (*Cov'try NE*)
 Alexander, Douglas
 Allen, Graham
 Anderson, Janet (*Rosendale*)
 Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
 Atherton, Ms Candy
 Atkins, Charlotte
 Austin, John
 Bailey, Adrian
 Baird, Vera
 Banks, Tony
 Barnes, Harry
 Barron, Kevin
 Battle, John
 Bayley, Hugh
 Beard, Nigel
 Begg, Miss Anne
 Bell, Stuart
 Benn, Hilary
 Bennett, Andrew
 Benton, Joe
 Berry, Roger
 Best, Harold
 Betts, Clive
 Blackman, Liz
 Blears, Ms Hazel
 Blizzard, Bob
 Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
 Borrow, David
 Bradley, Rt Hon Keith (*Withington*)
 Bradley, Peter (*The Wrekin*)
 Bradshaw, Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brinton, Mrs Helen
 Brown, Rt Hon Gordon
 (*Dunfermline E*)
 Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas
 (*Newcastle E & Wallsend*)
 Brown, Russell (*Dumfries*)
 Browne, Desmond
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Colin
 Burnham, Andy
 Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
 Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
 Cairns, David
 Campbell, Alan (*Tynemouth*)
 Campbell, Mrs Anne (*C'bridge*)
 Campbell, Ronnie (*Blyth V*)
 Caplin, Ivor
 Casale, Roger
 Caton, Martin
 Cawsey, Ian
 Challen, Colin
 Chapman, Ben (*Wirral S*)
 Chaytor, David
 Clapham, Michael
 Clark, Dr Lynda
 (*Edinburgh Pentlands*)
 Clarke, Rt Hon Tom (*Coatbridge*)
 Clarke, Tony (*Northampton S*)
 Clelland, David
 Clwyd, Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ms Ann
 Coleman, Iain
 Colman, Tony
 Connarty, Michael
 Cook, Rt Hon Robin (*Livingston*)
 Corbyn, Jeremy
 Corston, Jean
 Cousins, Jim
 Cran, James
 Cranston, Ross
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John (*Hornchurch*)
 Cunningham, Jim (*Cov'try S*)
 Cunningham, Tony (*Workington*)
 Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
 Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
 Davey, Valerie (*Bristol W*)
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Rt Hon Denzil (*Llanelli*)
 Davies, Geraint (*Croydon C*)
 Dawson, Hilton
 Dean, Mrs Janet
 Dhandu, Parmjit
 Dobbin, Jim
 Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
 Dowd, Jim
 Drown, Ms Julia
 Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
 Eagle, Angela (*Wallasey*)
 Eagle, Maria (*L'pool Garston*)
 Efford, Clive
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Ennis, Jeff
 Farrelly, Paul
 Field, Rt Hon Frank (*Birkenhead*)
 Fisher, Mark
 Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna

Flint, Caroline
 Foster, Rt Hon Derek
 Foster, Michael (*Worcester*)
 Foster, Michael Jabez (*Hastings*)
 Francis, Dr Hywel
 Galloway, George
 Gapes, Mike
 Gibson, Dr Ian
 Gilroy, Linda
 Goggins, Paul
 Griffiths, Jane (*Reading E*)
 Griffiths, Nigel (*Edinburgh S*)
 Griffiths, Win (*Bridgend*)
 Grogan, John
 Hain, Peter
 Hall, Mike (*Weaver Vale*)
 Hall, Patrick (*Bedford*)
 Hamilton, David (*Midlothian*)
 Hamilton, Fabian (*Leeds NE*)
 Hanson, David
 Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
 Harris, Tom (*Glasgow Cathcart*)
 Havard, Dai
 Healey, John
 Henderson, Ivan (*Harwich*)
 Hendrick, Mark
 Heppell, John
 Hesford, Stephen
 Hewitt, Rt Hon Ms Patricia
 Heyes, David
 Hill, Keith
 Hinchliffe, David
 Hodge, Margaret
 Hoey, Kate
 Hood, Jimmy
 Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
 Hope, Phil
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, Rt Hon Alan (*Newport E*)
 Howarth, George (*Knowsley N*)
 Howells, Dr Kim
 Hoyle, Lindsay
 Hughes, Beverley (*Stretford*)
 Hughes, Kevin (*Doncaster N*)
 Humble, Mrs Joan
 Hurst, Alan
 Hutton, John
 Iddon, Dr Brian
 Illsley, Eric
 Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
 Jackson, Helen (*Hillsborough*)
 Jamieson, David
 Jenkins, Brian
 Johnson, Alan (*Hull W & Hessle*)
 Johnson, Miss Melanie
 (*Welwyn Hatfield*)
 Jones, Helen (*Warrington N*)
 Jones, Jon Owen (*Cardiff C*)
 Jones, Kevan (*N Durham*)
 Jones, Lynne (*Selly Oak*)
 Jones, Martyn (*Chwyd S*)
 Jowell, Rt Hon Tessa
 Joyce, Eric
 Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
 Keeble, Ms Sally
 Keen, Alan (*Feltham & Heston*)
 Keen, Ann (*Brentford & Isleworth*)
 Kemp, Fraser
 Khabra, Piana S
 Kidney, David
 King, Andy (*Rugby & Kenilworth*)
 King, Ms Oona (*Bethnal Green*)
 Knight, Jim (*S Dorset*)
 Kumar, Dr Ashok
 Ladyman, Dr Stephen
 Lammy, David

Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
 Laxton, Bob
 Lazarowicz, Mark
 Lepper, David
 Leslie, Christopher
 Levitt, Tom
 Lewis, Ivan (*Bury S*)
 Lewis, Terry (*Worsley*)
 Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
 Linton, Martin
 Lloyd, Tony
 Love, Andrew
 Lucas, Ian
 Luke, Iain
 Lyons, John
 McAvoy, Thomas
 McCabe, Stephen
 McCartney, Rt Hon Ian
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonnell, John
 McFall, John
 McGuire, Mrs Anne
 McIsaac, Shona
 McKechin, Ann
 McKenna, Rosemary
 Mackinlay, Andrew
 MacTaggart, Fiona
 McWaller, Tony
 McWilliam, John
 Mahmood, Khalid
 Mahon, Mrs Alice
 Mallaber, Judy
 Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Gordon (*Blackpool S*)
 Marsden, Paul (*Shrewsbury*)
 Marshall, David (*Shettleston*)
 Marshall, Jim (*Leicester S*)
 Marshall-Andrews, Robert
 Martlew, Eric
 Merron, Gillian
 Miliband, David
 Moffatt, Laura
 Moran, Margaret
 Morgan, Julie
 Morley, Elliot
 Mountford, Kali
 Mullin, Chris
 Munn, Ms Meg
 Murphy, Jim (*Eastwood*)
 Murphy, Rt Hon Paul (*Torfaen*)
 Naysmith, Dr Doug
 Norris, Dan
 O'Brien, Bill (*Normanton*)
 O'Brien, Mike (*N Warks*)
 Olnor, Bill
 O'Neill, Martin
 Organ, Diana
 Owen, Albert
 Palmer, Dr Nick
 Pearson, Ian
 Perham, Linda
 Picking, Anne
 Pickthall, Colin
 Pike, Peter
 Plaskitt, James
 Pond, Chris
 Pope, Greg
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Sir Raymond
 Prentice, Ms Bridget (*Lewisham E*)
 Prentice, Gordon (*Pendle*)
 Prescott, Rt Hon John
 Prosser, Gwyn
 Purchase, Ken

Purnell, James
 Quinn, Lawrie
 Rapson, Syd
 Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
 Robertson, John
 (*Glasgow Anniesland*)
 Robinson, Geoffrey (*Cov'try NW*)
 Rooney, Terry
 Ross, Ernie
 Ruane, Chris
 Ruddock, Joan
 Russell, Ms Christine (*Chester*)
 Ryan, Joan
 Sarwar, Mohammad
 Savidge, Malcolm
 Sawford, Phil
 Sedgemore, Brian
 Shaw, Jonathan
 Shipley, Ms Debra
 Simon, Siôn
 Simpson, Alan (*Nottingham S*)
 Skinner, Dennis
 Smith, Rt Hon Andrew (*Oxford E*)
 Smith, Angela (*Basildon*)
 Smith, Rt Hon Chris (*Islington S*)
 Smith, Jacqui (*Redditch*)
 Smith, Llew (*Blaenau Gwent*)
 Soley, Clive
 Southworth, Helen
 Squire, Rachel
 Starkey, Dr Phyllis
 Steinberg, Gery
 Stevenson, George
 Stewart, David (*Inverness E*)
 Stewart, Ian (*Eccles*)
 Stinchcombe, Paul
 Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
 Straw, Rt Hon Jack
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Taylor, Rt Hon Ann (*Dewsbury*)

Taylor, Ms Dari (*Stockton S*)
 Taylor, David (*NW Leics*)
 Taylor, Dr Richard (*Wyre F*)
 Thomas, Gareth (*Chwyd W*)
 Thomas, Gareth R (*Harrow W*)
 Tipping, Paddy
 Todd, Mark
 Toughig, Don
 Trickett, Jon
 Truswell, Paul
 Turner, Dennis (*Wolverhampton SE*)
 Turner, Dr Desmond (*Kempston*)
 Turner, Neil (*Wigan*)
 Twigg, Derek (*Halton*)
 Twigg, Stephen (*Enfield*)
 Tynan, Bill
 Walley, Ms Joan
 Ward, Ms Claire
 Wareing, Robert N
 Watson, Tom
 Watts, David
 White, Brian
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Wicks, Malcolm
 Williams, Rt Hon Alan
 (*Swansea W*)
 Williams, Mrs Betty (*Conwy*)
 Wilson, Brian
 Winnick, David
 Winterton, Ms Rosie (*Doncaster C*)
 Wood, Mike
 Woodward, Shaun
 Woolas, Phil
 Worthington, Tony
 Wright, Anthony D (*Git Yarmouth*)
 Wright, David (*Telford*)
 Wright, Tony (*Carmock*)
 Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mr. Tony McNulty and
 Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

NOES

Cameron, David
 Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies
 (*NE Fife*)
 Carmichael, Alistair
 Cash, William
 Chidgey, David
 Chope, Christopher
 Clappison, James
 Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth
 (*Rushcliffe*)
 Collins, Tim
 Conway, Derek
 Cotter, Brian
 Cran, James
 Curry, Rt Hon David
 Davey, Edward (*Kingston*)
 Djanogly, Jonathan
 Dodds, Nigel
 Doughty, Sue
 Duncan, Alan
 Duncan Smith, Iain
 Evans, Nigel
 Ewing, Annabelle
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, Michael
 Field, Mark (*Cities of London*)
 Flook, Adrian
 Forth, Rt Hon Eric
 Foster, Don (*Bath*)
 Fox, Dr Liam
 Francois, Mark
 Gale, Roger

Garnier, Edward
 George, Andrew (*St Ives*)
 Gibb, Nick
 Gidley, Sandra
 Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
 Goodman, Paul
 Gray, James
 Grayling, Chris
 Green, Damian (*Ashford*)
 Green, Matthew (*Ludlow*)
 Greenway, John
 Grieve, Dominic
 Gummer, Rt Hon John
 Hague, Rt Hon William
 Hammond, Philip
 Harris, Dr Evan (*Oxford W*)
 Harvey, Nick
 Hawkins, Nick
 Hayes, John
 Heald, Oliver
 Heath, David
 Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
 Hendry, Charles
 Hoban, Mark
 Holmes, Paul
 Horam, John
 Howard, Rt Hon Michael
 Howarth, Gerald (*Aldershot*)
 Hughes, Simon (*Southwark N*)
 Hunter, Andrew
 Jack, Rt Hon Michael
 Jenkin, Bernard
 Johnson, Boris (*Henley*)
 Jones, Nigel (*Cheltenham*)
 Keetch, Paul
 Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles
 (*Ross Skye & Inverness W*)
 Key, Robert
 Kirkbride, Miss Julie
 Kirkwood, Archy
 Knight, Rt Hon Greg (*E Yorkshire*)
 Lait, Mrs Jacqui
 Lamb, Norman
 Lansley, Andrew
 Laws, David
 Leigh, Edward

Letwin, Oliver
 Lewis, Dr Julian (*New Forest E*)
 Liddell-Grainger, Ian
 Lidington, David
 Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
 Llwyd, Elyn
 Loughton, Tim
 Luff, Peter
 McIntosh, Miss Anne
 MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
 Maclean, Rt Hon David
 McLoughlin, Patrick
 Malins, Humphrey
 Mates, Michael
 Maude, Rt Hon Francis
 Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
 May, Mrs Theresa
 Mercer, Patrick
 Mitchell, Andrew (*Sutton Coldfield*)
 Moore, Michael
 Moss, Malcolm
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Norman, Archie
 Oaten, Mark
 O'Brien, Stephen (*Eddisbury*)
 Opik, Lembit
 Osborne, George (*Tatton*)
 Ottaway, Richard
 Page, Richard
 Paice, James
 Paterson, Owen
 Pickles, Eric
 Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
 Prisk, Mark
 Pugh, Dr John
 Randall, John
 Redwood, Rt Hon John
 Reid, Alan (*Argyll & Bute*)
 Rendel, David
 Robathan, Andrew
 Robertson, Angus (*Moray*)
 Robertson, Hugh (*Faversham*)
 Robertson, Laurence (*Tewkesbury*)
 Robinson, Iris (*Strangford*)
 Robinson, Peter (*Belfast E*)
 Roe, Mrs Marion

Rosindell, Andrew
 Russell, Bob (*Colchester*)
 Salmond, Alex
 Sanders, Adrian
 Sayeed, Jonathan
 Selous, Andrew
 Shepherd, Richard
 Simmonds, Mark
 Simpson, Keith (*Mid-Norfolk*)
 Smith, Sir Robert (*W Ab'ns*)
 Soames, Nicholas
 Spelman, Mrs Caroline
 Spicer, Sir Michael
 Spink, Dr Robert
 Spring, Richard
 Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
 Steen, Anthony
 Streeter, Gary
 Stunell, Andrew
 Swayne, Desmond
 Swire, Hugo
 Syms, Robert
 Tapsell, Sir Peter
 Taylor, Ian (*Esher & Walton*)
 Taylor, John (*Solihull*)
 Taylor, Matthew (*Truro*)
 Taylor, Sir Teddy
 Thomas, Simon (*Ceredigion*)
 Thurso, John

Tonge, Dr Jenny
 Trend, Michael
 Turner, Andrew (*Isle of Wight*)
 Tyler, Paul
 Tyrie, Andrew
 Viggers, Peter
 Walter, Robert
 Waterson, Nigel
 Watkinson, Angela
 Webb, Steve
 Weir, Michael
 Whittingdale, John
 Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wilkinson, John
 Willetts, David
 Williams, Hywel (*Caernarfon*)
 Williams, Roger (*Brecon*)
 Willis, Phil
 Winterton, Mrs Ann (*Congleton*)
 Winterton, Nicholas (*Macclesfield*)
 Wishart, Pete
 Yeo, Tim
 Young, Rt Hon Sir George
 Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:
 Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

To be presented by Privy Councillors or Members of Her Majesty's Household.

AS-levels

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Angela Smith.]

10.42 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I am pleased to have this opportunity to raise AS-levels. Before doing so, I must welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills, the hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis), as this is his first appearance at the Dispatch Box after a well-deserved promotion. I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in wishing him well.

This subject is of great interest to pupils, parents and teachers—especially the thousands of pupils who have just taken AS-levels and the thousands who will commence studies later this year for next year's AS-level examinations. I declare something of an interest as the parent of a child who has just worked hard for her GCSE examinations and who is awaiting her results before, we hope, starting four AS-levels next year. Like many thousands of parents, I am waiting for my child to commence a course that will lead to examinations that have generated a wave of criticism from the pupils who have just taken them.

My key skills in technology do not go very far, but one does not have to go far on the internet to find out what this year's AS-level students have to say about the exams. For example, Carolyn Briars—a pupil who has just taken her AS-levels—placed her views on the electronic internet for schools via the electronic telegraph. I am sure that she spoke for many others when she said:

"The Government has made this year miserable for 17 year olds. We are the guinea pigs in an experiment that has robbed us of a year of our lives. Instead of having two years to study for our A levels, we've had A/S levels at the end of the first year. That means by the time we take our A levels, now called A2s, we will have had important exams for three years in a row. I am exhausted and fed up with it".

Her comments are echoed by many others, including the widely respected John Clare, who says:

"There is now no doubt that the introduction of A/S levels has been a real disaster and that the educational consequences will be far reaching".

Those sentiments are finding an echo in classrooms, staff rooms and households throughout the country, and they are widely held in my constituency, as revealed by a survey that I conducted of several schools in Hertsmere. There was significant criticism of the way in which AS-levels were administered in their first year—there were a number of teething troubles, to say the least—but the survey revealed that the criticism goes beyond the details of administration and introduction.

In schools' criticisms of AS-levels, some themes recur repeatedly. In particular, first, many heads feel that the introduction of AS-levels means that pupils will be over-assessed. Public examinations at ages 16, 17 and 18 are too much. Secondly, a common complaint—is that figures in almost all the reports that one reads—is that AS-levels have been introduced at the expense of extra-curricular activities. Schools throughout the country, including those in my constituency, are saying that because, as we all know, the lower sixth is a particularly important year for the development of extra-curricular activities and in the life of the school; in many schools, school activities depend on the contribution of the lower

sixth. In my constituency, schools have complained that pupils have given up valuable activities such as sport, Duke of Edinburgh award schemes, community work and choirs.

Thirdly, another common theme of schools' responses is that AS-levels were taken at the expense of breadth of approach in chosen subjects. An example that has been quoted to me is that the study of English texts that are not set texts has been curtailed. Not the least significant factor in the curtailment of wider study has been the fact that in this summer term time has been lost to study leave and examination time for AS-levels.

Fourthly, AS-levels are failing to meet their stated objective of broadening the sixth-form curriculum—an objective that many people support. That is an important issue, and it lies at the root of AS-levels. Interestingly, broadening the curriculum was the defence offered by the Secretary of State in the debate on the Gracious Speech last week.

Ministers must face the fact that evidence suggests that a broader approach and a broader curriculum is not being achieved by AS-levels. Heads in my constituency tell me that most students are taking only four subjects at AS-level. Perhaps the Minister will confirm in writing, if he cannot do so tonight, that the majority of pupils taking AS-levels take only four subjects. Moreover, in very many cases, those four subjects involve students staying within the confines of either science or the humanities, without crossing the divide so as to bring about greater breadth.

In all too many respects, what the Government have put in place with AS-levels resembles an unsatisfactory halfway house between the rigour and depth of the three A-levels of the past and the international baccalaureate, which requires pupils to study six subjects over two years, including both arts and sciences, and which also requires extra-curricular activities. AS-levels obviously do not approach that breadth. There are strong suggestions that many of the most academic schools believe that A-levels and AS-levels no longer involve the depth and rigour associated with A-levels in the past, and are considering a switch to the international baccalaureate.

Against that background, it is hardly surprising that the new Secretary of State announced a review of AS-levels as one of her first acts on taking office, although it is perhaps a little surprising that the Government announced the inquiry into AS-levels while children were still taking them. In announcing the review, the Secretary of State accepted that the key skills qualification has caused particular difficulty and has indeed been a source of additional complexity, as many teachers throughout the country would testify—but the problems with AS-level go much further than that.

It would certainly be a mistake to confine the inquiry to the key skills qualification only; it needs to go a great deal further. I hope that the review by the new head of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority will go further. The new head of the QCA could do worse than to consult the old head of the QCA, Dr Nick Tate, who has become a headmaster since leaving that body. He is quoted as saying:

"It wasn't until I came to take over a school that I began to think that perhaps we had all got it wrong. I don't think we fully thought out all the available options before we added a new tier of exams. It looks different when you are on this side of the fence"—an honest and honourable conclusion that might have been held by many of those who were on the other side of the fence in the first place.

[Mr. James Clappison]

I want to put several requests to the Minister. I shall do so in short order, because I understand that the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes) is interested in this debate and, with permission, wants to make a brief contribution.

I ask the Minister to place the Secretary of State's remit letter to the QCA in the public domain and to tell us whether the review will be confined to the details of the implementation of AS-levels, or whether it can go wider and examine the case for having the AS-level at all.

I do not necessarily advocate the abolition of AS-levels, but it would be a good idea to consider the cases for and against them as part of the review, so that it could take a wide-ranging and full view of AS-levels. The QCA, and Ministers in particular, must face up to the wave of criticism that those exams have generated and the concerns of pupils and their parents who are about to undertake them. As matters stand, many would say that the introduction of the AS-level has been flawed and that it is an exam too far.

10.53 pm

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield): I thank the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the Minister for allowing me to contribute briefly to the debate.

In my maiden speech on Friday, I said that as a teacher for 22 years, a head of a sixth form for the past 12 years and, until about seven weeks ago, a teacher of an AS-level course, I thought that AS-levels had been introduced far too quickly. They should have been introduced next September at the very earliest, rather than last September. There are various reasons why teachers, students and universities think that the experiment with AS-levels has been rushed and not properly thought out. Students have been over-worked and overloaded. They have had no time for the extra-curricular activities in which they used to participate in schools and to which they used to contribute so much.

The exam timetable has been very badly planned in recent weeks. On several occasions, students have had two or three exams on the same day, often necessitating staying overnight with teachers because exams clashed the next day. The whole thing should have been more carefully thought through from that point of view. Universities have made it clear that they are not interested in the key skills qualification, and they are even starting to say that they will not consider the AS-level qualifications but will wait for the full A-level results, as under the old system.

There has been no time for the sort of extra activities and the development of course work that normally took place in year 12 in sixth forms. Finally, planning has been far too rushed and there has been a lack of funding for the new courses. I had to scrap an innovative A-level course that had run very well for 20 years. I had to introduce a brand new one, with no extra money to buy new text books. The new text books were not even on the market because they had not yet been written for a course that had only just been introduced. The whole thing has been rushed, as the national curriculum was in the 1980s.

10.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) on securing this Adjournment debate. I thank him for his kind and generous remarks about my new position. I suspect that those generous and kind remarks will not continue in the months ahead, but we shall see.

I respect the contribution made by the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes), on the basis that he has direct experience, having been a classroom teacher before entering this place.

It is important that I begin my response by reminding hon. Members of the background to the introduction of A-level reforms. The need for the reforms was identified by the Conservative Government in 1996. The excellent principles underlining the changes that the Labour Government introduced are as relevant today as they were in 1996. Those principles of increased flexibility, breadth and relevance of learning for young people must not be cast aside in a rush to judgment or in an atmosphere of cheap party political point scoring.

Indeed, there is nothing on the record to demonstrate that either of the Opposition parties, whose Members have contributed to the debate, raised those concerns in advance of the implementation of the reforms. So it is a bit rich of them, at this stage and with hindsight, to suggest that things should have been done differently. That is not to say that the Government are complacent or dismissive of the difficulties that young people and teachers have experienced during the first year of reform implementation. Indeed, I have spoken to young people and their parents in my constituency who have articulated concerns that I take very seriously indeed.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has acted decisively in responding to general concerns by asking the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to undertake an immediate review of the reforms, including the new AS-level qualifications. The authority will consult a wide range of institutions, organisations and students to establish a true picture of how all the reforms of advanced level qualifications have worked out in reality. It will focus on both the strengths and the weaknesses of implementation in year 1.

The QCA's report will be in two stages. The first, due by the middle of July, will identify the key issues and make recommendations for immediate action that schools and colleges can implement. The second stage, which the QCA will present at the end of this year, will be more comprehensive, covering the full range of issues associated with the "qualifying for success" reforms, including the experience and outcomes of this summer's examinations. It will also make recommendations on improving delivery of the key skills qualification. We will then work with all organisations concerned to ensure that our A-level examinations continue to meet the needs of our students, employers and higher education, and remain the best of their kind in the world.

I can assure hon. Members that the review will address all the issues that they have raised this evening. It is true that a significant number, but not all, of students have

complained of overload. On the other hand, recent independent surveys have shown the positive effect of augmented programmes in reducing the drop-out rate among college students. It is essential that we do not lose sight of the value for young people of greater flexibility. The chance to gain qualifications after one year of advanced study provides them with a better basis for decisions about the future—a real choice between using their qualifications to enter the world of work immediately or staying on and completing A-levels as a passport to higher education.

We also acknowledge the need to evaluate the impact of the reform on teachers. It is important that the new qualifications maintain their rigour without placing unreasonable burdens of assessment on teachers. We expect the review to identify steps that can be taken to reduce burdens associated with the teaching and administration of the new system.

I am acutely aware of the specific concerns that have been expressed about this year's exam timetable, but any delay of AS or A-level exams would have had a knock-on effect on the release of results. Conversely, had we brought forward exams, that would have resulted in less

teaching and revision time for students. The review will consider ways of ensuring that next year's exam timetable better meets students' needs.

The review will also cover all aspects of the key skills element of the reforms, including assessment arrangements, whether level 3 and above add value for students, the use of proxy qualifications to replace all or part of a particular key skill and the scope for their extension from September 2001. Guidance on individual key skills will be revised in accordance with the review's findings. I assure the hon. Member for Hertsmere that we will act speedily to implement necessary changes as identified by the QCA review, and I shall consider his request that the remit letter be put in the public domain.

A willingness to acknowledge difficulties and to move swiftly to secure remedies is the sign of a listening and mature Government who give the greater priority to the best interests of students and teachers than the froth of short-term party political expediency.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 28 June 2001

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Foot and Mouth

1. **Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde): If she will make a statement on the holding of a public inquiry into matters relating to the foot and mouth outbreak. [R] [570]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): I begin by apologising to the House for the absence of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Rural Affairs who, as you know, Mr. Speaker, is a most assiduous and conscientious Member. He has written to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) and to you about his unavoidable absence. Also, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment is attending the preparatory discussions in The Hague for the forthcoming conference of parties on climate change. As you know, Mr. Speaker, it is always difficult at this stage in a Parliament, when no one can foresee the timing of these events.

It is right that we consider very carefully the issues connected with the foot and mouth outbreak. The question whether there should be a public inquiry as such is one for the Prime Minister.

Mr. Jack: I welcome the right hon. Lady to her first Question Time in her new Department. She mentioned the Prime Minister, but yesterday, when my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition asked him a simple question as to whether there would be a full-scale public inquiry into foot and mouth disease, the Prime Minister had considerable difficulty in giving a straightforward answer. Why are the Government finding it so difficult to answer that question?

We do understand that if the disease has a long tail, there may be a question about the timing of such an inquiry, but could not the right hon. Lady say today that in principle the Government accept that there should be a full-scale public inquiry, so that evidence can be accumulated before memories start to fade? If the Government have nothing to hide, they have nothing to fear from holding such an inquiry.

Margaret Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman is both too intelligent and too experienced not to know how

disingenuous he is being. I was surprised to read in yesterday's press the perfectly untruthful allegation that Ministers had ever suggested that there might not be an inquiry. The Prime Minister has made it perfectly clear from the start, as has every Minister who has commented on the matter, that of course, at the right time, there will be an inquiry. No one is more anxious than this Government to see that inquiry fully held.

The right hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that the term "full public inquiry" has a precise legal meaning. He may well have heard the recent radio interview with the president of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, in which the interviewer confidently asked, "Aren't you demanding that the Government commit themselves to a full public inquiry now?" and the answer was, "No, we are not, because what we want is an inquiry when the outbreak is over; an inquiry which is thorough and expeditious and which tells people, in the farming community and beyond, what they need to know."

I heard hon. Gentlemen say from the Conservative Back Benches, "We are calling for a full public inquiry." Yes, they are—not in the interests of agriculture, but because they hope it will be in the interests of the Conservative party.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): I welcome my right hon. Friend and her colleagues to their new positions and welcome the new Department, but I also pay tribute to their predecessors, who did a superb job in the most difficult circumstances. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] As someone who has had 44 cases of foot and mouth confirmed in my constituency and 240 farms culled out—a disastrous time for the whole of Teesdale—may I add my voice to those calling for a public inquiry into foot and mouth disease?

Margaret Beckett: Of course I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for what he said about my predecessors. I share his view that they have nothing to fear, and nothing to be ashamed of in their handling of the outbreak. I also wholeheartedly accept my right hon. Friend's assessment of the great problems and difficulties that have been caused in his area, as in many others, and of the need for a thorough look at everything that happened in the course of this disease, not least because its scale and the manner of its spread have been unprecedented. It is extremely important that we learn as much as we can from all the aspects of the case that we can.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): It is quite clear to everyone, not only in the House but in the country, that the scale of this disease demands a full, public, open and independent inquiry, and I hope that at some stage Ministers will recognise that. Surely, however, we do not need a panel of experts to tell us some of the obvious lessons; so will the right hon. Lady give us assurances that the Government are getting to grips with three things in particular? First, we need tighter port health inspections, so that we do not become subject to foot and mouth disease again very quickly. Secondly, we should alert the public, and everyone in the country, to the need to look at personal imports of food and plants, so that we can keep disease out for as long as possible.

Thirdly, we should introduce new biosecurity measures for all farms, and inspections to ensure that we reduce any incidence of animal disease in future.

Margaret Beckett: Of course I take the hon. Gentleman's point. He will have heard Ministers say repeatedly from the Dispatch Box that we are looking at, and taking on board, all issues of the kind that he raised. However, he will know that it is as yet not clear—although I know that there have been widespread allegations—whether the cause of the initial outbreak was imported food, and particularly whether it was illegally imported food. However, that does not alter the fact that of course it is important to ensure that that does not become a possible source of another outbreak, and the Government are very mindful of that.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I welcome the call for an open investigation, but will my right hon. Friend also make sure that that will include intelligence reports, whether from the police or trading standards, to ensure that we have the fullest possible knowledge about what went on during this dreadful outbreak?

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend is certainly right to draw attention to the range of material and information that may be available. He is also right to say that we need to take a careful and thorough look at how the disease spread as it did. I understand that not least among the reasons is that the presence of the disease was not known of for fully two to three weeks, which was probably the prime cause of the nature of the difficulties that followed.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): As it is quite plain that the right hon. Lady will not be appearing in front of a public inquiry in the near future, will she please undertake a personal inquiry into whether movement licences to and from Lincolnshire, which is not an affected area, are being unduly restricted? Furthermore, will she undertake a personal inquiry into why letters from me to her and to her predecessor regarding Mr. Dorey and his application for a licence have not yet been replied to despite the fact that I wrote on 28 May?

Margaret Beckett: First, I find it somewhat ironic to hear Conservative Members holding forth about the need for a public inquiry when I consider that, for so many years, they resisted any call for an inquiry into the BSE outbreak, which was infinitely worse even than foot and mouth.

Of course we are considering the movement restrictions. Indeed, we have made some changes and there was some alleviation a few days ago, which I understood to have been quite widely welcomed in the agricultural community. I am afraid that I have not seen the letter to which the right hon. Gentleman referred. I am sorry to learn that he has been waiting for a reply and I will certainly look into it.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): First, I welcome my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour to her new post. Already many farmers in Derbyshire have expressed enthusiasm for having such a local interest in their subject. Secondly, I echo the points made by the Liberal Democrat spokesman, but would add one element that he missed. Should not the consideration of import

controls and their adequacy be tackled with our European neighbours to ensure the security of internal transactions within the European market and to ensure our ability to be confident of the adequacy of those controls at the first point of entry into the European Union?

Margaret Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks. We have always worked closely together in the locality and I look forward to working even more closely with him now if, as may indeed be the case—of course, it is not a matter for me—he remains a member of the relevant Select Committee.

My hon. Friend has a good deal of knowledge in this field and I entirely accept his point. It is important not only that we have the right approach, policy and scrutiny as regards the handling of imports, but that we encourage others elsewhere in the European Union to learn from our experiences and take their own precautions. I am happy to say that, as my predecessor reported to the House, I see every sign of the very supportive and sympathetic hearing that we have had from our European colleagues at the Council of Ministers continuing. It is clear that they are anxious to learn for themselves the lessons that we have had to learn.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I recognise that the previous Conservative Government were wrong to resist the calls for an inquiry into BSE. I am amazed that the very Labour Members who were so vocal in their calls for that inquiry appear, now that they are Ministers, to be resisting similar calls for an inquiry into foot and mouth disease. The Government have lost the trust of rural communities because of their handling of foot and mouth. Only an independent and public inquiry at which Ministers and former Ministers can be questioned will restore that trust. The previous Labour Government held such an inquiry after the 1967 epidemic. Surely the Secretary of State realises that sooner or later she will be forced to do the same thing for this epidemic. On Tuesday morning, I sent her our proposed terms of reference for the inquiry. Will she say what was wrong with those?

Margaret Beckett: I am delighted to hear what the hon. Gentleman said about the BSE inquiry—a sinner who comes to repentance late is better than a sinner who does not repent at all. Nevertheless, that does not excuse the Conservative party's rather pathetic behaviour in trying to pretend that the Government have not said from the very beginning that of course we have every intention of holding an inquiry.

Let me remind the hon. Gentleman that the president of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons said:

"We are not looking for a full public inquiry on the model of the Phillips BSE Inquiry, which took . . . two to three years . . . and cost probably thirty five million."

The form that any inquiry should take is clearly very much an issue to be kept under review because—I repeat—despite what Opposition Members say, I see no evidence whatever from the rural communities that they want anything other than an inquiry that, yes, is carried out properly and expeditiously and that produces the information that people want. They are not interested in party political games; they are interested in answers.

Kyoto

2. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): What assessment she has made of the level of international support for the Kyoto agreement. [571]

10. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): What measures she plans to advance the Kyoto accord. [579]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): The overwhelming majority of countries continue to support the Kyoto protocol. The Government will continue to make every effort to promote a successful outcome at the next round of negotiations in Bonn in July. We will also continue to encourage the United States to re-engage with the Kyoto protocol.

Mr. Kidney: I am fortified in pursuing this question by the batch of letters that I received this week from Rising Brook high school, from 13 and 14-year-olds putting forward their concerns about global warming and their suggestions for meeting the challenge. On their behalf, as well as my own, I shall ask some specific questions. Will President Bush's decision to turn his back on the Kyoto protocol undermine the resolve of other signatories to ratify it? What line on global warming is my hon. Friend's Department taking in its relations with its American counterpart?

Mr. Morley: We very much regret the fact that President Bush has stated that the United States is not prepared to ratify the agreement. We believe that it is important to engage the Americans and to continue to try to persuade them that such an agreement is absolutely vital. I am very pleased to hear about the interest of young people in my hon. Friend's constituency, because the agreement is very much about the future of this country and, indeed, the future globally.

I am pleased to say that other countries are actively engaging in discussions. I should also make it clear that, if necessary, we will go ahead with the ratification of the Kyoto treaty without the Americans, but we would much prefer them to engage in the process, and we hope that they will reconsider their position.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Does the Minister agree that the Kyoto protocol is arguably the most important environmental issue that the world faces at the moment and that Britain could play a very constructive role in brokering a deal between the United States and the rest of the world; but does he also agree that that role is diminished by the fact that his Department is undertaking the preparatory negotiations, yet the Deputy Prime Minister is now in charge not only of the negotiations but of the Cabinet Office? Is that a tribute to the Deputy Prime Minister's forensic negotiating skills, or yet another example of unjoined-up government?

Mr. Morley: It seems to me that the contrary is true, because the Deputy Prime Minister has had a long involvement in the negotiations, and he will continue to do so, but the Government take the issue very seriously. That is why we have engaged in it at a number of levels, and of course it is a very important issue for my Department. The fact is that we think we are making very

good progress. We have a long way to go, but there is a possibility of reaching an agreement at Bonn. We are also encouraged that, in subsequent speeches, President Bush has recognised the importance of the agreement and has also been somewhat taken aback by the strength of feeling internationally about the fact that the Americans, who are such big energy users, are not prepared to ratify the agreement. So, we have work to do, but I believe that we can make progress, and we are engaged at all levels of government because of the importance that we give to such issues.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): Does my hon. Friend agree that the platform that we take on the world stage should be very much joined up with the platform we take not only on national policies but in the European Union? In my part of south Yorkshire, which he knows very well, we are seeking European protection for Thorne and Hatfield moors to end peat extraction on that land and to restore that very precious asset, not only for Britain but for Europe and the world. Will he support our proposal to make that land a candidate for special European protection when we seek to submit the names shortly?

Mr. Morley: It is important that we conserve all natural resources. Thorne and Hatfield moors are one of the best examples of raised peat bog in this country. My hon. Friend is right to say that I know it well. I am aware of the enormous amount of work that she and her colleagues in the area have put into conserving it. We certainly want to see progress made in the designation and protection of that important site.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): It is clear that hon. Members on both sides of the House are rightly exercised about the threat to Kyoto. Will the Minister focus on the Government's responsibilities? The House of Commons Library tells me that of the 84 signatories to the protocol, 34 have ratified it. That group does not include the United Kingdom. Why have the Government not ratified the protocol and when do they propose to do so? Will they concentrate a little less on lecturing others and a little more on doing something to move the Kyoto process forward?

Mr. Morley: I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman does not seem to have been following the progress of the negotiations. If he had, he would understand that it is better for us to ratify in conjunction with our European partners, in a block rather than individually. That is what we are moving towards. There is no delay. We want to ensure that the agreement is supported internationally, so we are preparing the ground for ratification together with our European and other partners.

Rights of Way

3. **Paddy Tipping** (Sherwood): What advice has been given to local authorities about reopening the rights of way network. [572]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): In my statement last week, I said that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Rural Affairs would review the powers of local authorities to impose a blanket ban on footpaths in an area. He has

now announced the intention to lift this general power except where a specific local authority shows that it needs to continue the power for a further period.

Paddy Tipping: Has not the foot and mouth crisis and the consequent closure of the footpaths shown the economic value that walkers, climbers and birdwatchers contribute to the rural economy? Given that, is it not ill-conceived and short-sighted for councils such as those in Lincolnshire, the East Riding of Yorkshire and Hertfordshire to have made so little progress in opening footpaths? Will my right hon. Friend introduce proposals to get rid of the blanket ban as quickly as possible?

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important and powerful point. It has been a revelation to people in many areas of the countryside to realise the sheer value that walkers and hikers contribute to the local economy. It has been a surprise for people to find how much difference the lack of walkers has made. In the longer term, that can only be worth while.

I understand my hon. Friend's concern that some authorities have been particularly resistant to or ultra-cautious about opening footpaths. We wanted to wait and see how much progress could be made without revocation of the ban, but officials are now in discussion with local authority representatives, and my right hon. Friend the Minister of State hopes to make a further announcement in about two weeks.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Does not the issue illustrate the need for a proper public inquiry? Does the right hon. Lady accept that what should be of paramount concern is the safety and the future of British agriculture? That is all that matters at the end of the day. Cannot all those issues be properly examined only if there is a full public inquiry when the outbreak finally comes to an end?

Margaret Beckett: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his ingenuity in working into this question, a request for a full public inquiry, as there is no evidence that any walker or hiker has made contact with foot and mouth disease. As I have said on many occasions, and as my predecessors have said, the Government have every intention of holding an inquiry, but we do not wish to be bound to a specific legal form at this time as we want to find the most effective way of carrying one out.

Andrew Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I welcome the Government's decision to consider the blanket ban on footpaths. As we move towards the school holidays and the holiday season generally, does my right hon. Friend accept that it is most important that clear and accurate information is available across the country to people thinking of visiting the countryside about how many footpaths and how much access land will be available to them?

Margaret Beckett: I accept that, and I take my hon. Friend's point. We are doing everything that we can to make available information that is as up to date and accurate as possible. My hon. Friend will know that a code of conduct for users of rights of way is available on

the former MAFF website. We are endeavouring to make available as much information as possible so that people can use the footpaths in the summer holidays.

David Burnside (South Antrim): Will the right hon. Lady seek a case study from the devolved Stormont Department responsible for agriculture and read it carefully to learn the lessons from the more effective, efficient and competent handling of the foot and mouth crisis evident in Northern Ireland? As someone who lives on a farm there and knows England, I think that there are many lessons to be learned.

Margaret Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. We keep in touch with the devolved Administrations and endeavour to learn what we can from each other. However, the sheer scale of the problems that were faced by the authorities in other parts of the United Kingdom were not quite matched by the problems in Northern Ireland.

Food Sourcing

✓ **4. Mr. Colin Pickthall** (West Lancashire): If she will meet the British Retail Consortium to discuss methods of improving local sourcing of food produce. [573]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): The British Retail Consortium represents one of the key sectors in the UK food chain. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met it yesterday and they discussed a wide range of issues.

Mr. Pickthall: I am pleased about the coincidence of that meeting's timing. Does my hon. Friend agree that the British Retail Consortium has an enormously important role to play in encouraging local sourcing of agricultural produce? Does he also agree that the practice by some of the big retailers of arbitrarily ending contracts with local growers, especially in Lancashire, creates serious business problems for growers and increases the environmental damage by multiplying lorry miles as they haul heavy produce back and forth across the country? Will he continue to place pressure on the British Retail Consortium to strengthen local sourcing of produce and fully shoulder its environmental responsibilities?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend makes a serious point about food miles, regional foods, regional distribution and regional marketing, and we raise those issues with the British Retail Consortium and large retailers. He will be aware that following on from the Competition Commission report, a statutory code of practice has been recommended to cover some of those matters. That is being prepared by the Department of Trade and Industry and will be completed in due course.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): The Minister will know about the great number of distortions in the food chain. Of particular concern for dairy farmers is the failure to achieve a sustainable increase in the farmgate price of milk for both liquid milk and cheese production. There was a hint in the previous Parliament that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was producing a study on the food chain as it applies to milk producers and the

supermarkets. Will he confirm whether that is the case? If it is, when will the report be finalised and what action will be taken to improve the lot of dairy farmers?

Mr. Morley: One change that will improve the lot of dairy farmers is to act on the Competition Commission's former recommendations to split up the former Milk Marque into regional co-operatives. That will help with prices and competition. We consider the issues carefully, but most are market driven. That is why it is important for the agricultural sector to ally itself more closely with the market and consumers. The Department is, of course, providing help and support, both financially in terms of market advice and in discussions with end users.

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East): If my hon. Friend has such discussions, will he consider how the quality of pigmeat from animals-raised on swill differs from that of pigmeat produced by other forms of pig-rearing methods? I understand that the taste is different. Will he consider whether it is appropriate to lift the ban on properly prepared pigswill so that that market can be more fully exploited?

Mr. Morley: The ban on pigswill was introduced as a result of the foot and mouth outbreak, in the light of concerns about applying the regulations on heat treatment, and that was the appropriate course to take. There are one or two exemptions for pig feed that has a low risk of disease spread. We will give those matters careful consideration.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): In the light of the claim this week by the major bakeries, justifying the 9p rise in the price of a loaf of bread on the basis of an increase in wheat prices—whereas, in fact, as I am sure the Minister knows, the total cost of the wheat content of bread is less than 8p a loaf and the increase probably 1p—will the Government now adopt the Opposition's policy to introduce a quarterly survey of comparisons between trends in retail prices and in farmgate prices, so that both consumers and farmers know who is being taken for a ride by manufacturers?

Mr. Morley: There is nothing new about those trends. Indeed, the information is collected and made available. If the hon. Gentleman has ideas about how that can be disseminated more widely, we will of course be willing to consider them. Again, these are market issues, a fact which emphasises the need for the agriculture industry to take into account market changes and be involved in some of the added value and downstream distribution of products. That is the way in which agriculture should go. Many of our policies are designed to assist producers in having more of a stake in such matters.

Foot and Mouth

6. **Mr. Steve Webb** (Northavon): What further plans she has to support businesses affected by the consequences of foot and mouth disease. [575]

9. **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk): What plans she has for compensating ancillary businesses hit by the foot and mouth crisis. [R] [578]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): More and more small rural businesses are benefiting from the measures that we have introduced. More than 11,000 affected businesses have had cash benefits, either through deferral of tax payments or approval of hardship rate relief or in grant awards from the regional development agency business recovery fund. We are continuing to keep the operation of each scheme under review.

Mr. Webb: I am grateful for that reply, but draw to the Minister's attention the situation in my constituency, which has more than 400 farms, several cases of foot and mouth and many businesses affected by the knock-on effects of the disease. My constituents were shocked to learn that they are not rural because other parts of the authority area have higher population densities, and "rural" is defined on the basis of the whole authority. In reviewing the schemes that she has described, will she include businesses that have suffered from foot and mouth, regardless of whether other parts of the authority have higher population densities?

Margaret Beckett: Of course I will look at the precise issue that the hon. Gentleman raises, but he will know that there is always some difficulty in defining terms in the context of such schemes. A very careful balance was struck on the proportion of authority areas that could be considered on anyone's definition to be rural, and that has been looked at several times. I am prepared to look at it again and to consider his point, but I am not undertaking that it will necessarily make all the difference as he is hoping.

Mr. Bellingham: Will the right hon. Lady join me in paying tribute to the hundreds of slaughtermen and women who gave up their time to ensure that the cull was professionally carried out? Will she particularly thank those hundreds of hunt staff who gave their time and commitment, which the Government accepted only grudgingly and belatedly? Does she agree that the best way of saying thank you to those hunt staff is for her to make a firm commitment not to vote to destroy their livelihoods?

Margaret Beckett: I will of course heartily join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to slaughtermen and women or anyone else involved in the handling of this terrible outbreak, all of whom have been and, unfortunately, still are, working very long hours at what is frequently a thankless and unpleasant task. I was particularly gratified recently when I met people in the area of the most recent outbreak in Yorkshire to be told what high regard they had for the work of the staff of my Department and local authorities and of all those who have been involved. That does not always come across in media coverage, so I was very pleased to hear that and to pass it on to those who continue to work so thoroughly. As for the hon. Gentleman's final remarks, we may of course have to agree to disagree.

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): As well as considering support for rural businesses, will my right hon. Friend look at supporting charities such as the Treginnis farm for city children in my constituency? It has lost just under £100,000 as a result of foot and mouth

disease, and it would be a tragedy if that organisation, which offers experience of the living countryside to children from inner-city areas, were threatened because of financial hardship arising from foot and mouth.

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an interesting and slightly unusual point. I must admit that that case had not been brought to me before. I shall certainly make some inquiries and consider whether there are means whereby, through the overall operation of the various schemes, the charity can be assisted.

My hon. Friend will know, however, that many worthwhile organisations and small businesses are affected by the outbreak. For the vast majority, the most important thing is that we bring the outbreak under control to such an extent and come so much closer to achieving its end that their customers return to them. That will do more good than any compensation scheme.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Among the businesses losing out as a result of foot and mouth disease, the tourism industry has lost more than most. Will my right hon. Friend examine the sense of some of the biosecurity measures that have been used, especially those that affect the tourism industry? In April, I was banned from walking along stretches of the Pembrokeshire coastal path where there were no animals within miles, but shortly thereafter I found myself trapped behind a muck-spreader driving along the road. Clearly, the muck-spreader poses a far greater risk of passing on the disease, but the rules do not allow that to be banned.

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the impact of the difficulties on tourism and the way in which the early reaction, before we had a clear picture of where the disease had spread, resulted in the closure of some areas of the country and some footpaths which with the benefit of hindsight we can see might not have been justified by the degree of risk they presented. Now, what we are encouraging everyone to do and what we as a Department are trying to do is to ensure that the action taken is proportionate to the risk posed. My hon. Friend is right to say that the movement of vehicles and contact with and between animals are the key triggers in the spread of the disease.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Will the Secretary of State accept that many businesses, including farmers who have over-30-month-old cattle, have suffered irrecoverable losses as a direct result of foot and mouth disease for which no compensation has yet been offered? When will she complete the review of that problem which her predecessor promised in the House? When will she publish the proposals to rebuild the rural economy in the wake of foot and mouth disease to which she referred in the House last week? Does she realise that many businesses are engaged in a daily and desperate struggle for survival? They need more action, such as interest-free loans, now—not at some unspecified future date that happens to be convenient to the Government.

Margaret Beckett: Of course I admit that many people are suffering losses with which the Government are not in a position to assist, and that one particular category of those affected is made up of those who have cattle that would have gone into the over-30-months scheme but

cannot currently do so. On the plans for recovery and the review, first, we are looking at those issues and will make any announcement that we can as soon as we can; secondly, there is what I would characterise as the relatively short-term farm recovery plan, which we hope to introduce in the not-too-distant future.

In addition, as the hon. Gentleman will know, the Government have committed themselves to set up an independent commission to examine the longer-term context of and future for the countryside and, within it, the agriculture industry. It is extremely important that we undertake that debate and that we try to ensure that our actions in the short term to overcome the short-term difficulties experienced as a result of the outbreak do not cut across the action necessary for long-term sustainable agriculture within a context of sustainable development.

Waste Disposal

7. Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): What steps she is taking to develop an integrated strategy for the disposal of household waste; and if she will make a statement. [576]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): The Government set out their programme for delivering sustainable waste management in "Waste Strategy 2000", published in May. Since May, we have set statutory targets for household waste recycling and composting; published guidance on municipal waste management strategies for local authorities; found major extra funding from the spending review 2000 for local authority waste and recycling; and established the waste and resources action programme with funding of more than £40 million to overcome market barriers to re-use and recycling.

Mr. Love: I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that incineration has a role to play in any waste strategy, yet considerable concerns remain about it, not least among my constituents, who look out on the largest incinerator in the United Kingdom. Those concerns are reflected in the recent court case involving Greenpeace.

What steps is my hon. Friend taking to address those concerns? First, will there be a more robust regulatory regime for the industry? Secondly, will better emission standards be set so that we can all be reassured that there is no impact on health as a result of incineration?

Mr. Morley: I am aware that, rightly and properly, my hon. Friend has been raising his constituents' concerns. He will appreciate that the increase in capacity of the local incinerator in his constituency will be decided by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. I cannot prejudge that decision, and I cannot comment whatever it may be.

I can tell my hon. Friend, however, that new emission standards have been put in place. The latest emission data show that the annual dioxin emissions from all the UK's municipal waste incinerators have fallen from 413 g to 1.8 g since 1995. The emissions are even lower than was previously thought. They are only one fiftieth of what is

currently emitted from the steel and iron industry, and only 6 per cent. of the sort of dioxins that would be emitted on bonfire night.

Tony Baldry (Banbury): Many parish councils and community groups are promoting household waste recycling schemes with help from money from the landfill tax credit scheme. These councils and groups are concerned that the Government appear to want to scrap the landfill tax credit scheme. Will the Minister explain why the Government want to kill off local parish and community environmental recycling initiatives?

Mr. Morley: That is not the case. I welcome the involvement of local councils and local parish councils in recycling. It is part of our strategy and targets to increase the amount of waste that is recycled. Many councils, including my council of North Lincolnshire, have made enormous advances with such things as municipal composting. We very much welcome and encourage such involvement. We have committed a further £1.1 million over the next three years to support those initiatives.

Food Supply

8. Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): What plans she has to review the supply of food within the UK. [577]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): The supply of food within the UK is kept under continual review by my Department as sponsors of the food industry.

Mr. Lloyd: My right hon. Friend will be aware that there has been growing disquiet, certainly on the part of consumers, about the way in which we produce food. With the establishment of the Food Standards Agency, the Labour Government have gone a long way towards responding to concerns about food safety, but will my right hon. Friend take on board concerns about the cost of production methods? Is she aware of the comments of the former chief economist of the National Farmers Union, Sean Ricard, who argued recently:

"After 50 years of subsidies, farming is the most hopelessly inefficient and uncommercial sector of the whole economy."

Even though this is a time of difficulty for farming businesses, will my right hon. Friend nevertheless examine whether subsidies to farming, in the form in which they have been made available in the past, have been good either for the consumer or for farmers, or whether the same money would not have been better spent on producing different kinds of work in rural economies?

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I have seen some reference to the article to which he referred. He will be aware that there is wide-ranging discussion in the agriculture industry in the United Kingdom and across the European Union about whether, as we consider reform of the common agricultural policy, we should be looking to change the direction of funding from direct support for production to support for other areas—not least the second pillar, where we are considering rural development and so on. That is exactly the sort of issue that we hope

the independent commission the Government have pledged to set up will consider in relatively short order. It is an important part of the future of the countryside and of the background to the way in which we decide to produce our food in future.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): The right hon. Lady rightly suggested that the supply of food in this country depends on farmers, both here and in the rest of the Community. How will she get the confidence of British farmers and her fellow Agriculture Ministers in the European Union, when she is the only member of that Council who is not an Agriculture Minister, and the only Minister looking after farming in the history of this country who is not a Minister of Agriculture?

Margaret Beckett: All the evidence suggests that, within both farming and the European Union—at the Agriculture Council—there is widespread understanding of the need to change the way in which we deal with agricultural support, which will mean seeing the farming industry as part of the wider food chain, which is quite proper. That may mean that people have different titles; I freely confess that I cannot recall the precise titles of all my colleagues in the Agriculture Council, but the right hon. Gentleman will find that Ministers there have a range of different responsibilities; they are not all simply Agriculture Ministers.

As for the attitude of the farming community, it has already expressed the view that it is pleased to see the farming industry's place in the food chain recognised in the title of my Department—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman does not believe that, but I assure him that I can direct him to the people who said so.

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): Is my right hon. Friend aware that there is growing public concern about food production, particularly in relation to meat, eggs and dairy produce? Will she join me in welcoming the "Freedom Food" initiative of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which ensures that animal welfare concerns are taken into account by farms, hauliers and abattoirs? Will she also consider looking at re-targeting financial incentives, initiatives and support for farms, abattoirs and hauliers that take those issues seriously?

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Certainly, when I do my shopping, mostly at my local Co-op, I look out for the "Freedom Food" label, which is an excellent RSPCA initiative. I know that it is not the only label geared to high standards, quality and a high standard of animal care, but I very much welcome it.

My hon. Friend raised a further important issue. Right across farming and the food industry, it is recognised that we want to aim for quality, and for labelling and information that will assure consumers of quality; we want to give them as much information as we can about where and in what circumstances the food that they eat is reared.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): Does the Secretary of State agree with her right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that the supermarkets are not playing fair? The right hon. Gentleman recently told farmers that

"the supermarkets have pretty much got an arm-lock on you people at the moment".

Is it not perverse to break up Milk Marque but leave the supermarkets untouched? How much does the dairy industry in this country have to decline before the Government do something?

Margaret Beckett: I am interested to learn that it is Conservative policy to take on the supermarkets; I am sure that they will be even more interested to learn that. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Competition Commission looked at those matters recently. Although it concluded that the industry was broadly competitive, it identified a number of practices about which it had concerns and which it felt adversely affected some suppliers and smaller retailers. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is aware that the commission recommended that the best way to deal with those issues was to have a binding code of practice for the larger supermarkets. Although that is a matter for the DTI rather than my Department, I anticipate that we shall see such a code of practice in the near future.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): When the Secretary of State takes on board the increasing consumer demands about food accountability, will she bear in mind the fact that more than 60 per cent. of the food currently imported into the United Kingdom could be grown here, and look at the way in which we subsidise and support food production to strengthen local markets and local accountability? If we do that, we will reduce pollution and congestion in towns, strengthen the links between producer and consumer, shorten food miles and give a boost to the organic food market, which desperately needs support for agriculture rather than agri-business.

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend will know that the Government have increased substantially the amount of support that we give to producers who move into organic production, and that there is widespread interest in promoting local markets and in encouraging local supply that is specifically geared and identified. That is all part of the direction of the current debate on these matters, and the Government certainly welcome it.

Foot and Mouth (Devon)

11. **Nick Harvey** (North Devon): If she will make a statement on progress in eliminating foot and mouth disease in Devon. [580]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): Significant progress has been made towards eliminating foot and mouth disease in Devon. Since the upsurge of the disease in March and the first half of April,

the number of cases has fallen to just one or two a week. Visits and tests are continuing in order to ensure that areas are free of the disease.

Nick Harvey: I welcome the fact that the number of incidents seems to have tailed off at present, but does the Minister understand that the farming industry in Devon is in a terrible state and that it is still reeling from the effects of the disease? Last week, the Department announced with something of a fanfare that some restrictions on movements would be lifted. Does the Minister understand that farmers have been beating a path to my door and that of the National Farmers Union offices, reeling from the news that they will now have to pay for veterinary inspection? What advice would the Minister give to Mr. Francis Courtenay, a farmer in the neighbouring village to mine? He has had no significant income since foot and mouth disease broke out in February, but now has 13 lambs that he wants to sell. He has now been told that he will have to pay £150 for the veterinary inspection and clean-up. That cost will work out at more than £10 a lamb, when each animal is likely to bring in only £35 or £36. Surely the Department understands that the farming industry is in a desperate state. What possible justification can there be for landing that additional financial burden on farmers at this time?

Mr. Morley: Of course I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's point about the costs being borne by his constituent. We are sensitive to that. However, the changes in movement restrictions have been welcomed by the livestock sector, as they have begun to bring some normality back to the markets. That is important, but changing the restrictions requires care, as moving livestock still entails enormous risks. That is why veterinary inspections have to take place.

I appreciate that there is a problem with regard to the costs borne by individual farmers, although some of those costs can be shared. So far, the Government have paid £1 billion in compensation for livestock that has had to be culled, and the total costs of the FMD outbreak are certainly in excess of £2 billion. However, I shall certainly take into account the point that the hon. Gentleman made.

Fuel Poverty

12. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West): If she will make a statement on the targets for the elimination of fuel poverty. [581]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): The goal of the Government is to seek an end to the problem of fuel poverty. The first target is to ensure that by 2010 no vulnerable household need risk ill health owing to a cold home. We will then seek to widen the focus to include those healthy adult householders in fuel poverty.

Mr. Amess: I fully accept the work done by the Minister for the Environment in trying to end fuel poverty, but during the consultation period a number of organisations objected to the definitions used in setting targets. They are especially worried that the term "gross income" rather than "disposable income" is to be used to determine which households are vulnerable. The right hon. Lady will probably answer that the use of either term

would help to end fuel poverty, and an announcement on the matter is expected in November. Before that announcement is made, will she consider dropping the controversial term "gross income", and replacing it with "disposable income"?

Margaret Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is correct in saying that the Government's goal is to eradicate fuel poverty, however that is defined. I take the point that some people consider that a different definition that included more people would be beneficial, but the Government have given a massive undertaking. It represents a huge step forward that no previous Government have been prepared to take, and it is necessary to proceed step by step.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members will keep up the pressure on the matter, and I applaud them for it. However, rather than quarrelling about the definitions—which the Government will keep under review—it seems to me that the main thing is to support the project and ensure that it has the effect that we all want it to have.

Animal Movements

13. **Dr. Nick Palmer** (Broxtowe): If she will proceed with restrictions on repeated long-distance transport of farm animals. [582]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): The most recent Agriculture Council unanimously adopted a resolution instructing the European Commission to bring forward early proposals for changes to the current rules. That will form the basis for change, including the possibility of reducing the number and duration of long-distance journeys of farm animals to slaughter.

Dr. Palmer: Does my hon. Friend agree that there has been widespread concern about the secondary market in farm animals, in which intermediate dealers buy animals and take them from market to market, seeking the best price? Does he also agree that that has been a significant factor in the recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease?

Mr. Morley: I certainly agree with the last point. There is no doubt that the recent growth in dealers' movement of animals around livestock markets has contributed to the wide spread of foot and mouth. There were approximately 2 million sheep movements in the three weeks before foot and mouth was identified in this country. We are considering proposals for dealing with that, and we are consulting the livestock industry. I am pleased that the Council of Ministers has decided to examine long-distance transport, including vehicle design, standards, enforcement and even the justification for it.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Does the Minister accept that farm livestock is transported over long distances in recent times because of the rapid reduction in the number of small abattoirs? That is the direct result of the huge cost imposed on them by regulation from government, not least the EU. Will the Government do something to re-establish small abattoirs? Many have closed in my area. We have one left—a good,

small, family-owned abattoir. If the Government act, they can claim that they are doing something sensible about repeated long-distance transport of farm animals.

Mr. Morley: We are taking action on that. We have already announced in the rural White Paper support of £8 million for small abattoirs. However, the position is a lot more complicated than the hon. Gentleman suggests. In many cases, long-distance movements in the United Kingdom mean driving animals past slaughterhouses and taking them to slaughterhouses at the other end of the country. That happens for all sorts of reasons, not least those mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) in relation to dealers moving animals from livestock market to livestock market.

We must tackle many complications, and the decline of small slaughterhouses, though important, is only one of them.

Rural Diversification

14. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): If she will make a statement on her Department's plans for rural diversification. [583]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): In the last Parliament, we announced several measures aimed at supporting the rural economy and encouraging it to adapt to changing market conditions.

The rural White Paper "Our Countryside: the Future—A Fair Deal for Rural England", which was published at the end of last year, contains several initiatives to help support a thriving rural economy.

Mr. Chapman: Does my hon. Friend agree that although help and information are available for diversification through the regional development agencies, the countryside agencies, structural funds and other sources, constraints often exist in planning law, regulations and guidance? That is often the principal constraint on diversification. Will my hon. Friend discuss the issue and those constraints with his colleagues in the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions?

Mr. Morley: Yes, we are doing that. My hon. Friend makes an important point. In some cases, planning restrictions have been unduly restrictive in relation to on-farm diversification. We do not want to exempt applicants from planning controls on vehicle movements, noise, emissions, smells. After all, planning controls exist to protect people. Nevertheless, we want to encourage diversification, and we are taking steps to do that.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Does the Minister appreciate that rural diversification can be helped by relatively small amounts of start-up capital? Does he know that, yesterday, in Skipton, the Craven Trust was set up to collect voluntary contributions to help people who have been affected by the foot and mouth outbreak? The Government funds that would match that money expire in two days' time. Will he ensure that areas where

foot and mouth disease has broken out recently in the cycle are not disadvantaged in comparison with those that unfortunately suffered it much earlier?

Mr. Morley: The right hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable point, and I can give him an undertaking that we will look sympathetically at the case that he has made.

I should add that the rural enterprise scheme, which is part of the English rural development programme, provides support for rural businesses. The regional development agencies also provide support designed to help rural businesses to recover. I understand the point that the right hon. Gentleman is making, and we shall look carefully at that matter.

Business of the House

12.30 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will the Leader of the House please give the business for the coming week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 2 JULY—Second Reading of the Homelessness Bill.

TUESDAY 3 JULY—Second Reading of the European Communities (Finance) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 4 JULY—Second Reading of the European Communities (Amendment) Bill.

THURSDAY 5 JULY—Motions relating to the Senior Salaries Review Board report and related issues.

Motion to amend the Standing Orders relating to Select Committees.

FRIDAY 6 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the following week will be:

MONDAY 9 JULY—Second Reading of the Export Control Bill.

TUESDAY 10 JULY—Second Reading of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 11 JULY—Consideration in Committee of the European Communities (Amendment) Bill (1st Day).

At 10 pm the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

THURSDAY 12 JULY—Opposition Day [1st Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition Motion; the subject to be announced.

FRIDAY 13 JULY—Debate on small firms on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for July will be as follows:

THURSDAY 5 JULY—Debate on the role of the Department for Work and Pensions.

THURSDAY 12 JULY—Debate on the report from the Agriculture Committee on organic farming.

THURSDAY 19 JULY—Debate on youth justice.

The House will also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, it will be proposed that the House rise for the summer recess at the end of business on Friday 20 July and return on Monday 15 October.

Mrs. Browning: I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement. Given the concern on both sides of the House about the current political situation in Northern Ireland, will he, as a matter of urgency, ask the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to make a statement to the House on Monday? We are all aware of the discussions that the Prime Minister is having today, and the issues that will come up in the next few days in relation to the future of the political situation in Northern Ireland are of great concern.

Will the Leader of the House also ask a Minister to come to the Dispatch Box next week to confirm, or at least dismiss, the reports that we have read with great alarm in the press this week about the imposition of VAT

on residential care home charges? This matter affects all of us as constituency MPs, and clearly has an important read-across for the public sector finances in relation to social services departments. It will also be a matter of great concern to individuals who are either paying for their own residential care or planning and making provision to do so.

The Leader of the House will also be aware that, in the concluding debate on the Gracious Speech yesterday, the Home Secretary, in answer to some very probing questions from the Conservative Benches, confirmed the new calculation by which the Government record asylum applications and the numbers of those denied asylum here. This matter has never been debated on the Floor of the House or announced in the House. We would welcome an opportunity to hear why the formulae have been changed, and to hear how the calculations are now made.

In giving the business for the coming two weeks, for which I am grateful, the Leader of the House announced that Wednesday 11 July will be the first day of consideration in Committee on the Floor of the House of the European Communities (Amendment) Bill. Now that the right hon. Gentleman has announced the possible date of the House rising for the summer recess, can he confirm exactly the number of days on which that Bill will be considered in Committee on the Floor of the House?

Mr. Cook: On the question of Northern Ireland, the whole House will understand the gravity of the circumstances and, whatever our party, we all hope that the Prime Minister, on his visit today, is able to make progress with those who are party to the disagreement over the Good Friday agreement. I can assure hon. Members that the House will be kept fully aware and informed of the developments.

At this stage, it would not be helpful to any of us to commit ourselves to making a statement on Monday, but I assure the hon. Lady that the Government are fully seized not only of the gravity of the situation, but of the importance of keeping the House fully informed, in the hope that we can best preserve a cross-party approach.

As regards VAT on care home costs, the hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the decision of a VAT tribunal in an individual case. The Government's position is clear: we do not believe that vulnerable people provided with care in residential homes should have to face VAT or be subject to it. There will be an appeal against the judgment. Whatever the outcome, we shall ensure that those in residential homes do not have to face increased costs as a result of the ruling.

On the asylum statistics, I am assured that there has been no change in the practice, but if the hon. Lady is in some confusion as to what is the practice or when it was introduced, we shall take every possible care to disabuse her and make it plain that there has been no change under this Administration in the basis on which such figures are counted.

Lastly, the House will of course have a full opportunity to debate the European Communities (Amendment) Bill, and we shall ensure that a motion to that effect is before the House when it considers Second Reading next week.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My right hon. Friend knows that setting up the Select Committees is tremendously important, and we welcome

[Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody]

the arrival on the Vote of the suggestion that we should take forward that essential part of our work as quickly as possible. May I have his assurance that Her Majesty's Government intend to get the Select Committees up and running before the break, so that they may not only decide on the subjects that they want to consider, but be able to gather information when the House resumes in the autumn?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her comments, and I hope that I commit no indiscretion by saying that I consulted her and some of her colleagues in considering what proposal we should table on the Standing Orders. That motion is on today's Order Paper and, apart from the modest question of the size of a Select Committee, they will find that the recommendations that they put to us are faithfully reflected there.

I take it that my hon. Friend was expressing the view that the Select Committees should be up and running before the recess. As I told the House last Thursday, that is my intention and the Government's wish. We want to get them up and running and we intend to try to achieve that by the week commencing 16 July. If we succeed, that will be the shortest time in any Parliament in which Select Committees have been set up. I stress again that that is a tight timetable that requires two separate motions and debates in the House, so I shall require co-operation from all parts of the House if we are to meet it.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): May I press the Leader of the House a little further? He said last night and again today that he will use his best endeavours, but can he give us a guarantee that he has had the assurance of full co-operation from the Conservative party? He will recall that, after the 1997 election, when there was another hiatus on the Conservative Front Bench, there was a long delay before the House was able to return to its normal practice of scrutinising the work of Departments and, indeed, other matters of Government concern. That represented a considerable problem in respect of Parliament carrying out its business.

In particular, does the Leader of the House have an assurance that the Standards and Privileges Committee will be set up in that time scale? There is important unfinished business, as he is only too well aware. I draw his attention to the fact, of which I am sure he is aware, that Standing Orders provide that, while the domestic and departmental Select Committees require nomination from the Committee of Selection, any Member or any group of Members can nominate for other, important Select Committees, such as the Standards and Privileges Committee, the Environmental Audit Committee and the Public Accounts Committee. If Front Benchers cannot agree by 16 July—that was the assurance that the right hon. Gentleman gave us—perhaps other Members will take matters into their own hands. That, I hasten to say, is not a threat; it is just a promise.

Mr. Cook: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says about its being not a threat but a promise. I am sure, however, that what he said has been heard on both sides of the House.

It is not for me to speak for the official Opposition, nor would I seek to do so; but I do not think I am misrepresenting the position if I say that they have been

fully co-operative in trying to ensure that we make reasonable progress with the setting up of Select Committees. I hope that, in offering that support and making businesslike progress, they are carrying with them all Members, not just Front Benchers.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): All?

Mr. Cook: I am assured that they are, so we can now relax a little.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) asked about the Standards and Privileges Committee. It is, of course, a very important Committee. I think it would be rather odd if we sought to set up Select Committees that did not include one dealing with standards and privileges, and I hope we shall be able to include it in the overall package.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): Are we being softened up for the non-renewal of the contract of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards? What is wrong with her being zealous in the performance of her duties?

Does my right hon. Friend recall that, in past Parliaments, we campaigned—before and during the "sleaze" allegations—for far tighter controls over matters relating to finance and Members of Parliament? The steps that were taken were very important. For heaven's sake, are we really going back to those former days? The Parliamentary Commissioner has performed her duties correctly. Why on earth should her contract not be renewed?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We do require a zealous Commissioner, and we will ensure that the House is served by a zealous Commissioner. As my hon. Friend says, the present Commissioner has been extremely zealous in performing her duties.

I deprecate the speculation that I have seen in the press about the future of Ms Filkin. I do not consider it in any way helpful to Ms Filkin or to her authority; nor does it serve any of the interests of the House. For the record, the House of Commons Commission has not even met in the current Parliament, far less reached any view on what it may or may not do when that contract becomes open for renewal—next year, not this year. I urge all Members not to rise to the bait that the media offer them to speculate.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Will the right hon. Gentleman see whether it is possible to organise a debate on the genuinely serious position of some of my elderly constituents who find themselves bed-blocked in hospitals? In the Princess Royal hospital in mid-Sussex, 20 per cent. of beds are blocked at any one time. People are having to spend nights and days on trolleys in the accident and emergency unit before they can get into a ward. All that is because the Government have redistributed—in effect, stolen—£15 million of social services money in order to distribute it to other parts of the United Kingdom, leaving West Sussex very short.

Will the right hon. Gentleman make time for debate on a matter that affects Members on a much wider scale than that of my constituency? Bed-blocking is a real problem, and is causing great hardship.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman can express his views in many quarters about the standard spending assessment,

which is basically what he is complaining about, but these have never been easy judgments under any Government. It is not easy to provide an outcome that is fair to all local authorities—authorities of differing character, and with differing requirements. I shall, however, happily draw the hon. Gentleman's comments to the attention of the Department of Health and encourage it to respond.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): I am sure my right hon. Friend knows how pleased many Members are that the Queen's Speech includes reference to a Bill to promote women's representation in politics. *[Interruption.]* How soon could such a Bill be introduced? Given that elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly are due to take place in 2003, selections for candidates are likely to start over the next 12 months. It would be helpful for all political parties if the legislation were in place by then.

Mr. Cook: I see that the Bill will be opposed, so that will be a factor in the decision of the business managers as to when we introduce it. I am fully aware of the urgency of the issue, and as a Scottish Member I understand my hon. Friend's point about the desirability of getting this measure in place in good time for the elections in 2003. That is why we included a reference to it in the first Queen's Speech of this Parliament, and we shall try to make diligent progress with it—in so far as the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) will allow us.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): The right hon. Gentleman may not be aware of the fact that the last full debate in Government time in this Chamber on their national drugs strategy took place on 2 July 1999. Bearing in mind the recent changes introduced by the Government, whereby responsibilities have been transferred from the Cabinet Office to the Home Office, and the United Kingdom anti-drugs co-ordinator is no more, retaining only an international remit, does the right hon. Gentleman feel that a debate in this Chamber on the national drugs strategy, with all its implications, is long overdue?

Mr. Cook: The House has just completed the debates on the Queen's Speech, during which a full day was available to discuss home affairs and there was also a full day on health issues. The Secretaries of State of those Departments took part in those debates. The issue that the hon. Lady raises will continue to be a serious and grave problem throughout this Parliament. During yesterday's debate, a number of hon. Members drew attention with force and vigour to the severity of the problem, and I assure the hon. Lady that she will have a number of occasions during this Parliament to ventilate her concerns.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): In warmly welcoming my right hon. Friend to his new post, may I add my voice to those calling for the speedy setting up of Select Committees? Does he agree with me that he and the House have a unique opportunity to make an historic advance in parliamentary democracy by strengthening Select Committees? Will he give us an early opportunity to debate the Liaison Committee's and the Hansard Society's reports on strengthening Select Committees?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his support of our progress in setting up the Select

Committees. Members from all parties have urged on me that the important, urgent priority is to get the Committees set up, but other questions need to be addressed. That is why I stressed last Thursday that the Modernisation Committee is among those that I want set up at an early date.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Oh no!

Mr. Cook: The right hon. Gentleman can be relied on to resist anything that smacks of the modern era, and to take our processes back to something more akin to the Gillray cartoon era, from which he comes. Most of the House want such a Committee to be set up and to examine some of the issues that my right hon. Friend raises. I shall be speaking at the Hansard Society conference in two weeks' time.

Mr. Forth: So will I.

Mr. Cook: Indeed, I noticed that the right hon. Gentleman will be speaking at the conference, and I look forward with great interest to seeing which of its recommendations he welcomes.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): Does the Leader of the House acknowledge that there will need to be an early motion to create the Committee of Selection if his timetable for the creation of departmental Select Committees is to be met? Will he confirm that if there is any delay or exception taken in the early stages of the creation of the Committee of Selection, that could prejudice his timetable?

Will the Leader also say a word about the business motion that he has helpfully tabled for 5 July? Is it tight enough to ensure that if the motion were amended—for instance, some of us would like the number currently suggested for the Education and Skills Committee to be increased from 11 to 17—there would be no danger of the outcome of any such motion prejudicing the timetable for the creation of the other departmental Select Committees?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman is right to outline again the pitfalls that lie along the way in order to secure the tight timetable that is necessarily set by the date of the rising of the House. I hope that all hon. Members will take his point on board.

On the business motion for next Thursday, I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will ensure that those who wish to table amendments to the current motion on Standing Orders will have an opportunity to do so, and if they are selected, to have them voted on.

The motion that I drafted and placed on the Order Paper fully reflects consultations with the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues on the Liaison Committee. I hope that, in the spirit of making good progress, what we have tabled will find consensus in many quarters of the House.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Will my right hon. Friend indicate when the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs will meet? Does he accept that there is growing unrest about regional disparities and growing concern about the lack of accountability for regional quangos? Will he accept that there is unease about

[Mrs. Louise Ellman]

responsibility for the regions being spread across at least three Departments, and that that means that it is essential for the Committee, for which so many hon. Members fought so hard, to be reconvened at the earliest opportunity?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to an important policy dimension. The Government have placed particular importance on regional policy and that is why we want to ensure that our decisions are properly scrutinised. I cannot give a date for when the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs will meet. I understand that it met only once in the previous Session. I hope that it can meet early enough in this Session to guarantee that it can meet again this Session.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new position. Will he use this opportunity to break with the practice that has been established over the past four years—of Ministers not answering the questions put to them? I should like to pray in aid an answer given to a question that I tabled to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to which I received a reply from the Financial Secretary on a much narrower point.

My question was on the representations that the Chancellor had received on the taxation of company cars and the assessment he had made of the impact of that taxation on company car use. I wonder whether the Leader of the House will agree to an early debate on the issue, because I have received many representations from employees who are lamenting the fact that they will lose the tax advantage. Regrettably, the reply I received was on the narrow point of the new CO₂ emissions-based company car tax, which was not what the question I tabled was about. Will the right hon. Gentleman assure the House that we will have a debate on the issue and that the Government will answer the questions put to them, oral and written?

Mr. Cook: I have to confess that I am not familiar with the question and answer to which the hon. Lady referred. There are remedies for her to pursue if she feels that her initial question was not answered properly. The House has many opportunities to debate tax matters. The hon. Lady may wish to lobby her party, as she will be aware that, during the business statement, I announced a day on which the Opposition can choose the issues they wish to raise.

Andrew Mackinlay: The Leader of the House has announced what is, in effect, a three-month closure of Parliament. I realise that in his early weeks as Leader of the House he cannot alter what has, unhappily, become a pattern over so many years. Will he look ahead to next year and discuss through the usual channels and with the Modernisation Committee the possibility of having a more even distribution of the parliamentary calendar, so that scrutiny and accountability can go on in this place even if the Government do not want to consider legislation? We should sit not just when we are considering Bills, but to provide scrutiny. Over the summer, will he consider an innovation and ask Ministers, with the support of the Prime Minister, to produce a report, on our return, on the activities of Departments over the closure so that the

stewardship of those Departments over the summer months can be the first business to be considered by Select Committees?

Mr. Cook: It is for the Select Committees to decide what business they wish to pursue. I am sure that my hon. Friend will pursue his suggestion with whatever Select Committee he chooses to serve on. For the record, the recess that has been announced is 86 days long, which is almost the average for the past eight or nine years—it has varied between 81 and 87 days. In the first Session after the 1992 election, which Conservative Members will remember was the last election they won, the recess was 94 days long.

I agree that it would make sense for us to have a rolling programme of legislation. It is one of the issues that I want to see addressed early in the Modernisation Committee, and I hope that we can get a smoother process than the sudden fits and starts with which we conduct our business at present within a 12-month period.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I warmly welcome what appears to be the co-operation in all parts of the House over the re-establishment of Select Committees. The sooner they are set up, the better for the House and its role in monitoring the Executive and holding the Government of the day to account.

However, I point out to the Leader of the House in a friendly fashion, following the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), that he failed to respond to the question by the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), a past Labour Chief Whip, who asked whether the Leader of the House would find time in the near future for a debate on the Liaison Committee's report, "Shifting the Balance: Unfinished Business." The right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland did not ask about the Modernisation Committee; he asked about the Liaison Committee. Does the Leader of the House not accept that that Liaison Committee report is very important, and may even go well beyond anything that the Modernisation Committee might do in due course?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his warm welcome for the speed with which we intend to proceed with setting up the Select Committees. On the Liaison Committee's report, which I have read with interest, he will be aware that when we met—I hope that I do not cause him embarrassment by saying that I have consulted him—I said that I would want to take a fresh look at some of these issues in the autumn. I would like to do so with his advice and consultation, and with that of anyone who serves on the Modernisation Committee with us. At an appropriate time, we can examine these matters on the Floor.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): Does my right hon. Friend agree, further to the answer that he gave my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay), that now is the time to look at the date for the start of the summer recess in 2002? Does he agree that one recommendation of the Modernisation Committee relating to the carry-over of Bills would help

him in that; and that the electors of this country have just elected a Parliament for a parliamentary term, not for a year-on-year dogfight that finishes each October?

Mr. Cook: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that the Government have been elected for a full parliamentary term, and with every intention of serving their full parliamentary term. I was therefore disappointed by comments suggesting that matters that were not in the Queen's Speech were not going to happen. The Queen's Speech is for one year; this Government are here for a full parliamentary term.

Much as I would want to help my hon. Friend, I believe that I would be in difficulty in being tempted into announcing now the date of the summer recess in 2002. I would hope to get just a little more satisfaction in the House for having announced the date for 2001.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Following the Government's announcement that they are embarking on a major review of energy futures, including a possible enhanced role for nuclear power, will the relevant Minister make a statement to the House on the terms of reference of that major review, so that we can be reassured that there will be a genuine level playing field, given the very powerful vested interests in that field?

Mr. Cook: It is very important that any examination of that subject should cover all the issues, and that all the various vested interests should be properly assessed. However, I would not really encourage the House to seek a statement on a review when it has just been announced. It seems to me much more logical that any statement should come towards the end of the review rather than at the start.

As I have repeatedly emphasised to the House, I have encouraged the setting up of the Select Committees as soon as possible. I would imagine that the Select Committee on Trade and Industry might well wish to consider the energy review as one of its urgent items of business.

Syd Rapson (Portsmouth, North): It is now a year since the unfortunate outbreak of anti-paedophile riots in my constituency. It is also three weeks since the longstanding leader of Hampshire county council was convicted of being a paedophile; we also have a city councillor held on far more serious charges, on the same basis. May we hold a debate on that issue, to ensure that checks are far more stringent and that anyone involved in this evil is precluded from public office?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend raises an important issue and one that must be of grave concern to his constituents and the local media. I fully understand why he has taken this opportunity to raise it on the Floor of the House. I encourage him to explore the avenues that are open to him to ensure that he can deal with the matter in greater detail, perhaps in an Adjournment debate or in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Forth: May we please have an urgent debate entitled, "The Great Census Cock-up"? Is it not time that we had a thorough explanation of why a procedure that has taken place efficiently for hundreds of years cannot be conducted by this Government? Is it a conspiracy,

or is it just sheer grotesque inefficiency that we are no longer able efficiently and accurately to count the number of people in this country?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman is well aware that the census is still being examined—[HON. MEMBERS: "The right hon. Gentleman."] I am sorry if I demoted the right hon. Gentleman and will take great care not to do it again. He is well aware that the results of the census are being collated and will be available, as they usually are, in the fullness of time. In the meantime, if he wishes to pursue the matter he has a remedy through both oral and written questions and I suggest he takes it up that way.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Did my right hon. Friend see the story in yesterday's edition of the *Financial Times*, under the headline

"Blair and Kennedy to press on with Lib-Lab alliance"?

The years have mellowed me and I am much more relaxed about these things than I used to be, but will my right hon. Friend be innovative and forward looking and perhaps arrange for regular reports to the House on the nature of the discussions that take place between the Prime Minister and the so-called Leader of the Opposition?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend's closing line was perhaps his most provocative and plainly demonstrated that he has not in any way mellowed with his years in the House. He calls for regular reporting. From my recollection of the previous Parliament that issue was not underventilated or underdebated in the House. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister looks forward with confidence to being asked about the issue frequently and to exploring it in this Parliament as much as in the last. I would tell my hon. Friend one thing: whatever may pass between the Cabinet and Front-Bench Liberal Democrat Members, it has broadly been my experience that one does not have to wait long to hear it fully reported—often in even greater detail than I remember from the meetings I attended.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Would the Leader of the House look again into the request for a debate on asylum seeker statistics, bearing in mind the fact that the decision to regard a family of six as one unit on arrival and as six on departure is not only a change of policy but a statistical fiddle and the sort of practice that one would not expect from a decent democratic Government?

Mr. Cook: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will ensure that a full statement is made to the House—I imagine it would be a written statement setting out the basis for the figures. Let us be clear that in the past year the Government made much rapid progress to ensure that decisions are taken more quickly and that those asylum seekers who are turned down are removed more quickly. If the hon. Gentleman had attended the Chamber yesterday, he would have heard my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary express his commitment to remove 2,500 per month within the near future. At the same time, we are ensuring that genuine asylum seekers get their decision more quickly and have the doubt about their position removed. We have achieved faster decisions,

[Mr. Cook]

quicker removal and quicker acceptance of genuine asylum seekers than was achieved by the Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported. I urge him to welcome that fact rather than to continue to complain about the figures.

John Cryer (Hornchurch): May we have a debate on the vexed question of mixed-sex wards? The Oldchurch and Harold Wood hospitals in the borough that I represent—they are not in my constituency, but they are used by my constituents—still have such wards, which is causing much offence and upset, despite the policy pursued by the Department of Health and the promises that the trust made to me.

On another matter, the City of London (Ward Elections) Bill was the first intended extension of the business vote since 1832 and it was promoted by a right hon. Gentleman who has since retired. It was supported by the Tories in their droves and was brilliantly sabotaged by my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that we will never see that Bill again?

Mr. Cook: If I may, I shall respond first to the very serious issue that my hon. Friend raises about mixed-sex wards. As he is aware, the Government's policy is that mixed-sex wards should be eliminated by 2002, and the last report showed that we are 93 per cent. on target to achieve that. I entirely accept that that is cold comfort to those hospitals that my hon. Friend mentioned which have been unable to achieve that progress.

I understand that the difficulty at Oldchurch hospital is that refurbishing the wards to provide single-sex accommodation is regarded as inappropriate pending the very large development that is about to take place. I am informed that the hospital's managers are considering other management practices to secure that objective, and I assure my hon. Friend that the Government will continue to press them to deliver on our commitment.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): On reflection, does the Leader of the House consider that his response to the perfectly sensible request of my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) in relation to Northern Ireland was adequate? Was it adequate merely to say that he would keep the House aware of developments in the Province? Is he not profoundly concerned by the turn of events there? Is it not the case that the community has been polarised and that there is the potential for a breakdown in democratic institutions, caused by the failure of Her Majesty's Government's policy, especially on the decommissioning of terrorist weapons? Can we have a full day's debate on that grave subject, which is of concern to the whole kingdom?

Mr. Cook: In fairness to myself, I must say that I expressed my concern at the gravity of the situation, and I do not think any hon. Member on either side of the House fairly listening to what I said would accuse me of not recognising that gravity or the deep concern felt on both sides of the House. I said at the time that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is, at this very moment, in Northern Ireland engaged in discussions on such matters.

It would not be right for the House to jeopardise my right hon. Friend's efforts by anticipating the outcome, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that in the event of the negative outcome that he anticipates, the House will have many opportunities to examine the issues.

Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Is my right hon. Friend aware that Keetch Cottage children's hospice, on the edge of Luton, has recently discovered that it has a £1 million deficit, thus jeopardising the palliative care for children in Luton and the surrounding area? I am sure that he will want to join me in offering thanks both to all those in the hospice movement who do so much for the care of our children in very difficult circumstances and to the community, which contributes the vast majority of resources to keep local hospices going, but will he please agree to hold an early debate on Government funding for hospices? That is necessary, given that hospices are saving the national health service considerable amounts of money and that they are so vital to patient care and medical services.

Mr. Cook: I fully appreciate the enormous value of the hospice movement, which provides particular support not just to the patients for whom it cares, but to all the relatives of those patients at a time of difficult crisis. That is why a commitment to the hospice movement was very strong in the NHS plan that the Government set out two months ago. I am very sorry to hear of the situation that my hon. Friend describes. I assure her that the Government and, I believe, all hon. Members support the work of those in hospices, and I ask her to convey our support to the staff of the hospice that she mentions.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): May we have a statement next week from the Minister of State, Cabinet Office about the code of ministerial conduct and, in particular, about which of its provisions allows for the sacking of a competent junior Home Office Minister simply because he insisted on telling the truth about a telephone call from one of the Prime Minister's Cabinet cronies?

Mr. Cook: It would be inappropriate for me to enter into a commentary on why particular decisions were made during the last reshuffle; otherwise, I might detain the House much longer than it would have anticipated. My hon. Friend, to whom the hon. Gentleman refers, did an excellent job at the Home Office. Indeed, that was reflected in many of the statements that were made yesterday, and it is for my hon. Friend to add to that if he wishes, but he made a speech of great dignity and utility in yesterday's debate on home affairs. The hon. Gentleman's suggestion is wide of the mark.

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): I, too, warmly welcome what the Leader of the House has had to say about establishing the Select Committees before we rise. I infer that he accepts that both sides of the House want to return to the Liaison Committee report. The House accepts that, in the interests of speed, the Select Committees will be established on the existing basis, and will remain dominated by the Government through the Whips Office. Does my right hon. Friend accept that Select Committees are parliamentary Committees, not Committees of the Government, so it is wholly illogical that their membership should be determined by the

Government, by whatever means? It is wrong for anyone to appoint their own scrutineers. Does he accept that case in principle?

Mr. Cook: The process by which Labour Members will be chosen to serve on the Select Committees is set out in the rules of the parliamentary Labour party. Decisions will be taken by the PLP, not the Chief Whip. If my hon. Friend wishes to serve on one of the Select Committees that we have nominated on the Order Paper today, he will receive an invitation in the Whip this Thursday. That democratic process through the PLP is to be commended, and I hope that all parties in the House will follow a similar democratic process.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): The Leader of the House may have heard the news this morning of yet another major Government computerisation project running into serious problems, this time affecting the courts service and the criminal justice system. Given that such difficulties are clearly a cross-departmental problem affecting the whole of government, will the Leader of the House look for an early opportunity for his colleagues from the newly beefed-up Cabinet Office to come to the House to debate the Government's information technology strategy?

Mr. Cook: I cannot say that I am aware of the case to which the hon. Gentleman draws my attention, but I shall report it to my right hon. and learned Friend and he may respond to him.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I welcome the Government's announcement today about family-friendly and flexible employment policies. Concern has been expressed, however, about the way in which employment agencies treat their workers, those workers' employment rights and their access to employment tribunals, especially in relation to proposed changes to the award of costs. Does my right hon. Friend intend to make any time available to discuss employment relations policies in the near future?

Mr. Cook: I cannot hold out the prospect of any immediate debate on that issue, but it is one of great importance and my hon. Friend is right to raise it. I hope that the House and its Committees will find opportunities to look into it. There will be regular opportunities to examine the responsible Ministers.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I congratulate the Leader of the House on his well-deserved and long overdue advancement within the ranks of the Government. Can we please have an early debate or a statement on the provision of beta interferon for the treatment of multiple sclerosis? Given the evidence that the drug is likely to be effective only if used early in the course of the disease, the National Multiple Sclerosis Society estimates that hundreds of people risk permanent disablement if they are denied access to the drug during the extended National Institute for Clinical Excellence appraisal, especially as that appraisal has been the subject of an enormous amount of cogitation over two years. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the very least that sufferers and their representatives are

entitled to expect from the Government is a comprehensive statement or debate on the matter before we rise for the summer recess?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the issue has been aired repeatedly in the House and in the press. He is a knowledgeable Member who does his research well, and he will be aware that the central problem is that NICE, which was set up to advise us on the use of drugs, has not advised the use of this drug in the NHS. Nevertheless, I shall happily convey to my colleagues in the Department of Health the fact that the hon. Gentleman has raised the matter again so that they can bear that in mind in their future considerations.

Mr. Gwyn Prosser (Dover): Will my right hon. Friend find time for an urgent debate on safety at sea following the damning report published this morning by the chief inspector of marine accidents? It links the astonishing decline in safety standards at sea with what it describes as "the lengths that some shippers will go to make a profit."

It goes on to say that of the 1,453 accidents reported in United Kingdom waters last year, just 3 per cent. were investigated. Will my right hon. Friend find time to discuss that urgent problem?

Mr. Cook: I heard about the report this morning and understand my hon. Friend's concern. Transparent reporting and full investigation of what goes wrong is vital to the confidence of those who use our merchant navy and to ensuring that such events are not repeated. I shall happily draw his comments to the attention of the relevant Minister and perhaps also to that of the Deputy Prime Minister who, as my hon. Friend knows, takes a close interest in such matters.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I warmly welcome what the Leader of the House said about VAT on care homes, but does he recognise the accelerating crisis in long-term care? That was demonstrated by the closure of yet another home in my constituency last week, which distressed residents of the home and their relatives. Will the right hon. Gentleman find time to debate the Government's strategy for long-term care, in particular how they propose to ensure that local social services departments have the cash available to house people properly when they most need it?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for welcoming my response to the tribunal ruling on VAT. He is right: the provision of long-term care is a worry to an increasing number of our constituents, and that problem will continue because of demographic changes. That is why we made the commitment that long-term care will be an important priority for the national health service plan that we are developing and why we have secured the basis on which free nursing care will be provided from October for those who require it in the long term. I will be surprised if this Session proceeds much further without a suitable opportunity for us to examine such matters. Health legislation is proposed in the Queen's Speech and we will introduce that as soon as possible.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): My right hon. Friend will be as appalled as everyone else about the rioting in recent months in Burnley, Bradford and Oldham

[Mr. Alan Simpson]

and the specific ways in which the National Front and the British National party have targeted areas to foment racial divides that split and devastate communities. Will he arrange for the House to debate the conditions of squalor and poverty and the shroud of hopelessness and despair that affect those communities and scar the urban landscape across Britain? They form the fundamental challenge that the House has to address if it is to confront the poisonous politics of the far right. Will my right hon. Friend give us the opportunity to set out specific ways in which we intend to do that and to build the unified, cohesive, inclusive and multiracial communities in which I hope most of us want to live?

Mr. Cook: I am happy to endorse my hon. Friend's concern, which is fully shared by those on the Front Bench. Indeed, in yesterday's debate, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary referred in strong terms to the recent riots. There was also an exchange in the House when my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) asked a private notice question. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) that the only people who gain from violence and destruction are extremists such as those in the BNP, who want to turn racism to their own poisonous political objectives. It is important that we defeat them. I agree that to do that, we must address not only the racism that was demonstrated in the riots, but the social conditions that breed tension.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Will my right hon. Friend hold a debate in Government time on the need to bring the working practices and hours of the House into this century? Hon. Members on both sides of the House raised that in the debate on the Gracious Speech and it was mentioned again today. Why is it necessary for hon. Members to take 20 minutes going to the Table Office with a question for a Minister when an e-mail takes two minutes? Why do we not start Tuesday's and Wednesday's important work in the House until 2.30 pm? There are big issues to address. I know about today's debate, but I am concerned that we will not be able to represent our constituents and to scrutinise legislation properly if we continue at this pace and do not have a wider debate on the subject. We will need to hit a few more centuries before we make progress.

Mr. Cook: I must confess that I do not think that I have too many more centuries left in me.

Mr. Bercow: More, more.

Mr. Cook: I am deeply encouraged by the hon. Gentleman, but I am not sure that I can rise to that challenge.

I would like more rapid progress than my hon. Friend suggests might be made, and her comments are relevant to the debate that we are about to commence. I agree entirely that there are many ways in which we can make our House more efficient and ensure that we use the latest methods of communication in order that we are able to use our time effectively in the task of scrutinising legislation.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to early-day motion 44?

[*That this House notes that Railtrack purchased their business apparently without a full understanding of their assets and liabilities; notes that railway bridges all over the country are now being closed or having their use restricted as a result; notes that some closures are putting lives at risk, such as that at Green Lane, Bolton, which lies on a main access route to the Royal Bolton Hospital and is expected to be closed for up to three years; requests Railtrack to repair those affected bridges which are causing the most disruption as a matter of urgency; and asks Her Majesty's Government to assess the scale of the problem and enter into a dialogue with Railtrack in order to persuade them to deal with this emerging situation.*]

All over the country, local authorities have been given the duty to inspect Railtrack's railway bridges, and they are closing them or severely restricting their use. Of several examples in my constituency, the worst is Green lane railway bridge, which has been closed for up to three years. That bridge lies on a main access route to the Royal Bolton hospital. I hope that my right hon. Friend agrees that the situation is intolerable.

My constituents have of course noticed that Railtrack continues to pay dividends to its shareholders and, more recently, paid £1.3 million to its ex-chief executive. May we please have statement from the Minister for Transport on whether he believes that Railtrack can meet all its financial liabilities in the near future?

Mr. Cook: I am aware of the early-day motion that my hon. Friend has tabled. He raises an issue that must be of great concern to travellers in his constituency and he has highlighted a matter of considerable concern among the wider public: payments to the former chief executive of Railtrack and the question that that raises about the company's relative priorities. I will draw my hon. Friend's comments to the attention of the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions and ensure that it responds to his local concerns.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): May I take this opportunity to welcome my right hon. Friend to his new position as Leader of the House? I assure him that there are many on the Labour Benches who welcome his wholehearted commitment to modernising the arcane proceedings of this place.

May I encourage my right hon. Friend to consider finding time for a matter that should be debated and be of concern to all democratically elected politicians: the appallingly low turnout at the recent general election? I respectfully suggest to him that reform of our democratic processes is an essential precondition to reconnecting with the swathes of disengaged young voters.

Mr. Cook: I entirely accept my hon. Friend's point about the importance of modernisation and welcome the support that he expresses for it. I am not sure that I necessarily see it as the main response to the question of voter participation in our democracy. The electorate will judge us by the extent to which we deliver on the programme that we set out at the election. If we do that, we can convince the public that democracy works and that the policies for which they voted are those that we

implemented. However, I agree with my hon. Friend that when our electors look at how we behave, the hours that we sit and the absence of fast, efficient electronic communications, they sometimes wonder whether we are living in the same century as them.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I raised with my right hon. Friend's predecessor the delay in the publication of the report of the review of support for student nurses. Obviously, that was some months ago. Given the need for many more student nurses in our hospitals, I urge my right hon. Friend, following discussion with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, to publish that report at the earliest possible time.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend makes a point that follows on neatly from a previous question. We have committed ourselves to an increase in the number of nurses over and above the increase achieved during the previous Parliament. My hon. Friend raises an important part of the process to ensure that we are able to provide nurses to match the substantial expansion in the number of beds in our 10-year plan. I shall make sure that our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health responds to my hon. Friend's question.

Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): May we have an early debate on the social value and economic prospects of independent retailers and community shopping parades? Many hon. Members will be aware of the continuous erosion of those community facilities, not least, in recent times, community pharmacies which are being forced to close by the drop in drugs prices. Will urgent consideration be given to council tax concessions for some of those groups, so that we do not end up with the retail deserts created when large retailers such as Tesco withdraw to make ever higher profits and leave various groups in our communities who lack proper transport without adequate retail facilities?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend raises an issue that must be familiar to any hon. Member who represents a constituency containing small towns from which such facilities are disappearing, and I share the deep frustration of Members who represent those towns and their residents when they find that their local pharmacy has disappeared and there is no readily available alternative. We have to be realistic: the secular change in shopping trends is one in which the public have fully participated because they find it attractive in many ways. It is important that local authorities and the supermarkets work together to preserve

shops in villages and small towns where they can, and, where they cannot do so, to make sure that there is readily available, free transport to the supermarket.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Members must be in the Chamber for the Leader of the House's statement if they want to ask a question, so I cannot call the hon. Gentleman.

John McDonnell: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I apologise, but I got stuck in traffic on the way here.

Mr. Speaker: I am sorry to hear that.

BILL PRESENTED

ELECTORAL FRAUD (NORTHERN IRELAND)

Mr. Secretary Reid, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Blunkett, Mr. Secretary Byers and Mr. Desmond Browne, presented a Bill to provide for the supply to the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland of the signatures and dates of birth of electors and persons seeking registration as electors in Northern Ireland; for the use of that information in connection with elections in Northern Ireland; for the issue of electoral identity cards by the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland; for the modification in relation to voters with disabilities of certain rules about voting procedure in Northern Ireland; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Monday 2 July, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 6].

Point of Order

1.27 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Before we come to the business of the House, will you provide some clarification as to the significance of the business motion? As I understand it, the debate can continue until 7 o'clock or later—that is the effect of the two motions on the Order Paper. Am I right in supposing that, if the debate on the business motions continued until 7 o'clock or later, the votes on the substantive motions would then be taken immediately, without any discussion of the merits of the substantive motions?

Mr. Speaker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is quite right. That would be the case.

Business of the House

1.28 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Stephen Twigg): I beg to move,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the name of Mr. Robin Cook relating to Programming of Legislation and Deferred Divisions not later than half-past Six o'clock; and such Questions shall include the Questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and those Questions may be decided, though opposed, after the expiration of the time for opposed business.

It might be helpful if I briefly introduce the motion, which I anticipate will ensure the orderly conduct of business and is for the convenience of hon. Members and of the House. It is a straightforward, simple procedural motion that allows you, Mr. Speaker, to close today's proceedings in a timely fashion, while providing a full day's debate. There is nothing new or controversial about the motion and I hope that the House will now agree to it without lengthy discussion, so as to ensure the maximum time in which to debate the real issues of the day.

1.29 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I am bound to say that, for a complete absence of explanation of the purpose of the business motion, the introduction that we have just heard takes some beating. I do not understand—I hope that the Minister will intervene and explain—why we have the business motion at all. I assume that without it the principal business of the House—the programming of Bills and deferred voting—could be debated until 7 o'clock when, according to your ruling, Mr. Speaker, votes would take place on those two matters there and then. Will the Minister please intervene—we have had no speech—to explain the need to introduce a programme motion to curtail the debate by 30 minutes? I am happy to give way to the Minister.

The situation becomes more astonishing. We have had no explanation of why we should go through the paraphernalia of debating the programming of business for the saving of half an hour. Apparently, that is what we are being asked to do.

I welcome the Parliamentary Secretary to the Dispatch Box, but failing even to try to explain succinctly what is before us and the purpose that the motion is intended to achieve is rather an odd way of starting. I repeat: am I right in saying that the purpose of the motion is to save 30 minutes of debating time this afternoon? If so, why?

Again, the silence is astonishing. The House is being treated with complete contempt. The Leader of the House knows well from past debates the anxiety that has been expressed by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House about trying to achieve sensible programming of business. He knows also that there are considerable anxieties about the way in which the system is exploited. Here we have a system being introduced in an irrational fashion, with absolutely no justification or explanation offered of why we should have to go through this process.

I hope that in the course of my short remarks and a short debate on the motion we might receive an answer from the Minister. I find it astonishing that none has so far been tendered. Does that not call into question the

entire issue that we shall have to discuss on the substantive motions? If we are to be treated in this fashion over a simple business motion, Lord help us when it comes to the major issues that we must discuss, which involve trying to hold the Government to account and which ask us to make substantial concessions in terms of the normal practice of the House for the sake, apparently, of improving the way in which business is conducted.

If the Minister cannot explain this simple motion in a coherent fashion, how can we have any faith or trust in the explanations that will be given on the substantive motions?

1.32 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I shall reinforce what my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) has said in opposing the motion. I have but a few points to make.

First, it is lamentable that the Minister who has charge of the motion should not have explained why he is introducing it. We are entitled to know. The fact that he has not told us, or even advanced an explanation, shows either a lack of mastery of his brief or a contempt for the House, which I find deplorable.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I notice that a note has now arrived from the Box to assist the Minister. Perhaps we might get an answer now. The Minister appears to have received it.

Mr. Hogg: I am sure that the Minister will need notes and advice. He will also have to learn to treat the House with something approaching respect. If he wishes to be, as I understand he is, the deputy Leader of the House—

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): What?

Mr. Hogg: I suppose that the hon. Gentleman is the deputy Leader of the House. He will have to take more care with the House. The purpose of the Leader's office is to represent the interests of the entirety of the House. If the junior Minister in the Leader's office does not have the courtesy to tell us why he is laying a business motion before the House—

Mr. Swayne: The hon. Gentleman does not know.

Mr. Hogg: I suspect that he does not, and that suggests that he did not properly prepare himself before speaking from the Dispatch Box. That shows a contempt for the House that I find wholly lamentable.

Secondly, it is not good enough that a debate of this sort, which is of some importance, should come out of the time that is allocated for the substantive motions that are to be debated. It is not necessary, either, because the House's business could be ordered so that we took the substantive motions in a way that ensured that full time was preserved for debate on them. The Government have chosen not to do that; they have taken a course of action that could result in questions on the substantive motion being put without any debate at all. If the House chose to debate the business motion until 7 o'clock, questions on deferred voting and programming in the substantive motion could be put to the House without any discussion. I suspect that that is deliberate; the aim is to try to curtail debate, which again shows contempt for free speech.

There is a related point to do with voting. If we are minded to press for a Division on the business motion, which we are perfectly entitled to do, that too will come out of the time allocated for the substantive debate. If we are to do our job properly, press the Government on why we have a business motion and ask for a proper explanation—which, if we find it unsatisfactory, we shall vote against—the time for all of that comes out of the substantive motion. That is yet another example of a tyrannical Government trying to confine the House and prevent proper discussion, and it is a disgrace.

1.36 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): This is a rather sad and sorry beginning to what will be a sad and sorry parliamentary day, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) reflected all too well.

The spectacle of a Minister coming to the House with no explanation at all for the motion on the Order Paper indicates all too readily the current relationship between the Government and the House of Commons, which is one of arrogance and total mastery. The Government's attitude is that the House is an irrelevance, inconvenience and nuisance to be swept aside; its role is to be minimised.

We shall shortly explore those matters further when we debate the main motion but, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham has already pointed out, the business motion illustrates only too well the difficulties that we now face. Ministers no longer regard it as their responsibility or duty to the House even to attempt to give any sort of explanation of their proposals. After all, technically at least, the motion is a proposal from the Government, to be considered and disposed of by the House. The sad fact is, after four years of the previous Parliament, in which the Government had a majority of 170, we now have to repeat the exercise. The Government believe that they have an absolute right to do what they wish in all circumstances and without even giving an explanation of their motives and what the consequences may be.

As Members, we are reduced to making a judgment on whether to curtail our remarks on this part of the day's business to preserve something of what is left. That is obviously the Government's intention; they are happy and think that they have been clever. In a sense, they are; the motion, together with the result of the motions that we have still to debate, is a relentless diminution of the opportunities available to Members, not just to question the Government and hold them to account, but to irritate them, delay them and cause them inconvenience. There is a new constitutional departure—the belief that the House of Commons exists for the convenience of Government Members.

That should be spelled out. At the start of what will no doubt be a distinguished and lengthy career, it would be helpful if the Minister set the stamp on it in a manner uncharacteristic of a Minister. Will he lay out for us with honesty and transparency the fact that the Government now regard the House of Commons as a necessary inconvenience, whose role they wish to diminish as far as possible so that the business can simply be got through as expeditiously as possible?

We hear from the babes on the Government Benches—and from other hon. Members—that they believe that being detained inconveniently in the House is

unacceptable in this modern age. They believe that the legislative process should be reduced and diminished to something that is quick, easy and efficient. Hon. Members would then be able to leave the House as soon as possible to get on with I know not what.

Mr. Hogg: My right hon. Friend is right, and does not that make it all the more scandalous that the House is likely to rise at 7 o'clock tonight? There is no reason why even the babes should not stay here a bit longer.

Mr. Forth: It remains to be seen how much time the Divisions later today will add—and, in the hope that hon. Members will be able to plan their busy day, I can assure the House that there will be Divisions later. We will then be able to assess how many hon. Members—and of what gender—will be present to vote.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am as perturbed as my right hon. Friend by the Minister's failure to offer a rationale for the motion in his unnecessarily truncated speech. My right hon. Friend has a track record of penetrating the inner recesses of ministerial minds: does he believe that the motion is an example of knavery or of folly, or is it a hybrid of the two?

Mr. Forth: The House should show its traditional generosity to the Minister, who has not been in his post long. He has not been in the House long, but I do not hold that against him. His opening remarks were brief, but I am sure that we will get a comprehensive and penetrating analysis from him after this debate. That will re-establish our confidence in him, which was dented by the way in which he stuck to his notes in his short speech. I hope that I can persuade Conservative Members to join me in being generous towards the Minister.

For hon. Members who love the House and believe that it should still have a role, this is a sad and depressing day. I fear that today's debates will show that a large step has been taken towards the House's demise as a true instrument for holding the Government of the day to account. I should like to think that I was wrong, but I suspect that I will have been proved all too right by about 7.30 this evening.

1.43 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): I share the view that the motion reveals the Government's contempt for the House, but it is equally true—and just as important—that the Government have contempt for the electorate. At the recent general election, voters sent hon. Members to the House to represent them. They deserve better.

I spoke in yesterday's debate on the constitution about parliamentary reform, and the motion reveals why that reform is needed. It is inconceivable that ordinary people could understand the verbiage and gobbledegook that today's Order Paper contains. I defy anyone to come up with a rational explanation for today's proceedings.

I have no sympathy for the Minister, who treated the House with contempt from the Dispatch Box. Equally, however, I severely censure those—in particular the Leader of the House—who are responsible for the disgraceful way in which today's debates are to proceed. The motions, if approved, will effectively cause debate on treaties and other important matters to be truncated and driven underground.

[Mr. William Cash]

I want to comment briefly on the motion. It calls to mind Dunning's famous motion of 1780, which stated:

"The power of the Crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished."

For the word "Crown", we should substitute "Executive"; for "Executive", we could substitute "Ministers of the Crown". That includes the Prime Minister.

The motion shows contempt for the House. More than that, it shows the contempt of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House for the people who recently voted in the election. No wonder there was a low turnout and such cynicism. Any electors who were confronted with such ridiculous gobbledegook and verbiage would have every reason to question why they should vote. Ministers should take the responsibility and the blame for that.

I would have expected the Leader of the House to rise above what we are witnessing today.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend makes a serious point about the verbiage in the motions. Does he agree that it would be a great improvement if the Order Paper always contained a summary of the consequences of the motions presented to the House?

Mr. Cash: As ever, I am delighted by my right hon. and learned Friend's remarks. Like most of my hon. Friends, he understands these matters. Labour Members apparently do not understand them. Bills that deal with treaties—one was published recently—and other important matters are accompanied by an explanatory memorandum, explaining in simple language what exactly is going on. Do not Members of Parliament have a right to such explanations of motions?

There is a serious problem. The confidence of Members in what is happening is at risk. Its diminution is the direct result of the sort of technical garbage that we are considering. It is therefore essential for the House to deal with the matter properly. I believe that some Labour Members agree with me in principle. I should be delighted if they addressed the matter, however moderately. I am looking at a specific Member, whom I know well. All power to the elbow of those who have the courage to stand up to their Government. The independence of Back Benchers in matters that relate to the power of the Executive is at risk. Hon. Members know that some Conservative Members occasionally had to inconvenience our Government.

We are considering a test case, which presents an opportunity for Members of good heart, good will and determination on behalf of Parliament to say from the beginning that we have had enough and that we will not allow such a method of proceeding to continue.

1.48 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): I came to the House with the joyous intent of wishing the new Parliamentary Secretary all the best. His appointment under the Leader of the House is important. Indeed, the Leader of the House is one of the most effective parliamentary speakers and questioners, who has—or had—a fundamental regard for the purposes of the House. I shall now enter a caveat: it is disappointing that,

with his first words in his new post, the Parliamentary Secretary moved a guillotine motion. The motion that we are discussing simply truncates business. It is followed by the important motions whose consideration it truncates, albeit by only half an hour, although it itself holds out the possibility of debate until any hour. I reflect on those matters because it is an unfortunate way for the Parliamentary Secretary's tenure to commence.

I think that it was Maine who said that justice was to be found in the interstices of procedure. I am conscious that in justice lies our liberty. The Leader of the House, when he took over these responsibilities on that glorious day, 8 June, must have closeted himself away to produce, between then and now, nearly seven pages of closely argued and reasoned motions. Reasoned? Well, argued, anyway, through the seven pages.

Is the House being given justice in being asked to examine something in only four and a half hours that strikes at its very function and purpose? These pages touch on the absolute control of the Executive over the House. That is why this little half-hour being taken out of those deliberations signals something: this is not now a matter for the House; it is a matter for the Executive.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I am a little bit baffled as to where this entire set of suggestions came from. Has it been debated on the Floor of the House before now, or in one of the Committees, perhaps giving us some of the answers to the questions that the hon. Gentleman is now asking?

Mr. Shepherd: There are no documents attached to this motion. It is purely an act of the Executive. It is being taken at the moment of the greatest vulnerability and weakness in the life of a Parliament, which is when it is a new Parliament. I look across the Chamber and I ask myself how many hon. Members have actually read the motions that are to follow, which are to be subjected to this guillotine. Two people have put their hands up. Any other offers? Now four people have put their hands up.

Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): Have you read them?

Mr. Shepherd: Yes, I have. I remember the great Michael Foot asking that question of "the ninnies on the other side" and they put their hands up. That is what we have reduced this Chamber to: not reason, not argument, but to the fact that we put our hands up. The reading of this document and the understanding of Standing Orders are important. When I first came into the House, I did not understand the constitution and the way in which we carry out our business. Our justice lies in these details. We are talking about the constitution not only of the Chamber but of this country.

If I cannot express myself, if I cannot argue even though I am mandated, and if it is solely the majority—or not even the majority, after all—that slaps in and says what will happen on occasions that follow this, I must ask the House to consider whether what is effectively a guillotine that will truncate our debate will allow us enough time to discuss in detail whether we shall have in future the opportunities that we have had in the past.

The traditions and freedoms of the House to represent our constituents touch on our liberties. The legislation that comes forth from our debates in this place is the criminal

law of our land. I ask the most important section of any Parliament—the majority—to reflect. Great issues will come up in this Parliament, such as trial by jury and double jeopardy. Such legislation will require amendment. Does this motion, which gives the Government the ability to set—to the minute, if necessary—what we may debate, enable us to discuss those matters now? It will be taken for granted that those on the Opposition Benches will oppose everything, although that is not the truth of the matter. We must reflect what we are bringing upon ourselves if we accept this: a Minister will be able to dismiss every amendment. That is what it says here.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman is very obviously referring to the motions yet to come. We are at the moment debating the business motion.

Mr. Shepherd: Sir, I would only suggest that I am referring to the motions in respect of the question of whether there is sufficient time to discuss them. Their import is so great that, having identified the principles behind them, I am arguing that there is not. That is the purpose of my reference.

It is difficult to condense into a four and a half hour debate the passions, the histories and the traditions of this country as a free nation in which freedom of expression was central to the way in which we undertook our business. I suggest that new Members should have the opportunity to read the seven pages of the motions. After all, the former Foreign Secretary must have spent an enormous amount of time preparing them.

If I am fortunate enough to catch your eye later, Sir, or if I am fortunate enough to be able to speak to the amendment, I shall ask many questions and address the issues then, but, as the matter stands, let us be absolutely clear that the time available is inadequate; that this motion does not give us the opportunity to discuss the matter sufficiently; and that we ought to stand back and put our view to the Leader of the House. Remember, he holds a unique post in which he tries to hold the balance between the interests of the House and—[*Interruption.*] I thought I heard the hon. Member for East Lothian (Anne Picking) say, "Too long." It is not my fault that the motion is on the Order Paper. The hon. Lady should take that up with her Whips and her Government. If she has a view, she can make her own argument as to why the time we have taken is too long. This "off with their heads" attitude has reduced the House to impotence, so that it is of no interest to the wider public outside.

I am trying to contain a fury at what is to come, although my anger started during what was to have been a tribute and well-wish to the deputy Leader of the House. I hope that he will understand that balance in future. When the present Leader of the House was already a Member, John Biffen, a former Leader of the House, said, "We have to remember that today's Government is tomorrow's prospective Opposition." Protect our freedoms and our liberties, and do not introduce these measures.

1.57 pm

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): I share some of the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) about the central

seriousness of what we are to debate this afternoon, in that it goes to the core of Executive control of the House and relations between the House and the Executive. The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) made the good point that we would all benefit from an explanatory memorandum on such motions. To go further, I would have welcomed an explanation from the Minister of the loss of half an hour.

Allowing for all that and for the central seriousness of a proposal which, unless the Leader of the House says otherwise, could in some respects represent almost instant guillotines on our proceedings, are we not being daft in wasting time on this debate? The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills made the point that we have only one afternoon to discuss the matter, but we have already wasted half an hour—

Mr. Forth: Wasted?

Mr. Fisher: We have wasted half an hour during which we could have discussed the substantive motion. We are merely debating the time available. Let us get on, because the issues are so important and so central to the balance between the Executive and the legislature that we need all afternoon to discuss that matter, rather than considering whether we are spending time wisely.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Has he finished? I thought that I was intervening.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) did not make his intentions clear. I assumed that he was giving way.

Mr. Fisher: For the convenience of the House, I am happy to give way, although I was within syllables of concluding.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is ever gracious.

Mr. Grieve: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Does he not think it right that we should spend a little time discussing the matter, particularly in the absence of an explanation? It goes to the very root of the relevance of the Chamber and the way in which we operate. The explanation could easily have been provided and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do what it is. Why could we not be told?

Mr. Fisher: I have some sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman says, but are we not losing our perspective? The important issue is the substantive motion, but we have spent half an hour discussing time, which is a slight error of judgment.

2 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher). However, while I agree with many of his sentiments, I do not agree with his specific suggestion that the time spent on this motion is wasted, because it and the next motion are inextricably linked. This motion is a

[Mr. Gerald Howarth]

forerunner of what is to come: this motion encapsulates the Government's attitude to the House. That is why my right hon. and hon. Friends and I are challenging it.

I am also delighted to follow the last Conservative speaker, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), whose passionate defence of this House and this Parliament—its traditions and its liberties—is an inspiration to many of us and will, I hope, serve as a lesson to many who have just joined the House. One day they will be on the Opposition Benches, just as one day I started out on the Government Benches. If they treat lightly the way in which we enact legislation on behalf of our constituents, they will not only do their own constituents a disservice, but fail to live up to the responsibilities conferred on them by the privilege of membership of the House. They should therefore treat it with great seriousness.

I do not wish to speak for long, but I will say this. Like my hon. Friend, I had hoped to be able to welcome the Parliamentary Secretary to his new post in the usual way. As the hon. Gentleman will know from the four years that he has spent in the House, the House is very understanding of new Ministers, and of the trepidation with which most sensible new Ministers approach the Dispatch Box—the nervousness, the anticipation and all the rest. It is unfortunate that the hon. Gentleman started off so inauspiciously; I hope that he will take advantage of the House's indulgence to return to the Dispatch Box and provide the proper explanation that the motion unquestionably demands.

As I said earlier, I consider that a motion to truncate debate on such hugely important issues by half an hour demonstrates the Government's contemptuous attitude to the House. It is significant that the first business before us since the debate on the Gracious Speech should be a measure to truncate the powers of the House, and to confer yet more powers on the Executive—powers that they arrogated to themselves in the last Parliament without the consent of the Opposition. That was not agreed by the House: it was agreed by the Labour party, and by no one else.

The Government should bear it in mind that vengeance will return. If they treat the House and the Opposition with such contempt, they should not expect, when the tables are turned, to be treated with the courtesy with which they should be treating the Opposition now.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend share the widespread view—it is certainly widespread on the Conservative Benches—that the intended circumscription of debate on business of the House motions would be unacceptable even if it had enjoyed cross-party agreement through the usual channels, which it patently has not? Does he also agree that we need not look into the crystal ball when we can read the book? We know from the way in which Programming Sub-Committees have been constituted that they entail domination by Government Whips. They are hand-picked; they are not accountable. It is here, in the House, that we have our only opportunity to express our views about the wisdom or unwisdom of what the Government propose.

Mr. Howarth: I agree with my hon. Friend; and if he casts his mind back to the last Parliament, he may recall

that there were those of us who did not always agree that the usual channels were the best defence of our liberties here. We are a new Parliament, however, and we are starting afresh. We mean to ensure—I hope that this applies to Members on both sides of the House; I am certainly much encouraged by what was said by my former Staffordshire colleague, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher)—that there is cross-party determination, in the interests of good government, to prevent the House from being treated with contempt by the Executive.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): The time will certainly come when Conservative Members will be sitting on the Government Benches, although I trust that it will not be for a long time. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that those of us who support the Government on this measure do so not out of arrogance or to prevent proper scrutiny by the Opposition—although we also have a responsibility in that respect—but because we want a balance between proper scrutiny, the role of the House of Commons and our sitting hours, which should be normal, and should not go right through the night when that is totally unnecessary?

Mr. Howarth: I accept that the hon. Gentleman is assiduous in his examination of the Executive, but I do not recall many all-night debates in the last Parliament. When I came into the House in 1983, we had night after night of all-night sittings. I did not enjoy that, and it is not the best way to run this place. I hope that Labour Members will understand that one of the reasons why we did what we did in the last Parliament, led by my indefatigable and wonderful right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), who was a great inspiration to us in our endeavours, was that we felt that there was no other way to get the message across that we did not believe that the balance that the hon. Gentleman wants to establish was being struck at the right point.

I want to conclude my remarks, because the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) was right that we should get on to the main business. I hope all hon. Members agree that it is a matter of central importance to the good governance of this country and to those who sent us here that we should have proper scrutiny of the Executive. However, the absence of people in the Press Gallery shows how little interest the media take in the serious issue of the government of this country. That should concern every Member of the House, from whatever party and regardless of the view they hold. The media's indifference to any discussion of these matters, and their concentration on the trivia of our private lives and issues of froth and no substance, is one of the reasons why the House is held in declining regard by our constituents, and why we need a proper debate on this issue. We do not need this programme motion, which, to the discredit of the new Leader of the House, is the first measure he has brought before us.

2.8 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I make a plea to the Leader of the House, who has a very important role. Will he please prevail on his junior Minister, before the debate is brought to an end, to provide a simple, straightforward, brief explanation of why this motion is necessary? As the right hon. Gentleman is aware, in the

last Parliament I was a member of the Modernisation Committee, and also had the honour to chair the Select Committee on Procedure. I am concerned about the House's ability to monitor the Executive and to hold the Government of the day to account.

I listen with deep respect every time my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) speaks, because, whether he is sitting on the Government Benches or on the Opposition Benches, his belief in upholding the integrity of the House is second to none.

I should like to respond to the intervention of the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), who is also a fine parliamentarian. The major part of the debate we are about to have will be based on the first report of the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons, Session 2000–01, "Programming of Legislation", in whose production my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills and I played a part.

We should get on to the main business, but the Government should at least have the courtesy to explain why this unfortunate motion is necessary.

2.9 pm

Mr. Stephen Twigg: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thank the Opposition for the warmth of their welcome for my first appearance at the Dispatch Box. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) for their kind words and the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) at least for his intent. I served with him and the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) on the Modernisation Committee for two years during the previous Parliament and I am aware of their experience and of their commitment to the House and to ensuring the effectiveness of the Chamber and the House in general.

The answer to the question that has been raised by many hon. Members is that, without this business motion it would be possible for the debate on the programming motion to continue beyond 7 o'clock. Were that to happen, the subsequent motion on deferred Divisions could be talked out. There may be some hon. Members who would like that to happen, and they can vote against this motion, although I urge hon. Members to support it so that we can begin the debate.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I understand that it is always possible to talk out Government business. If it were not, there would be hardly any point in having Members of Parliament. However, if such a mishap were to occur, is there any reason why the matter should not reappear on the Order Paper, perhaps even next week?

Mr. Twigg: This is not Government business: it is a matter for the House. It is based on a Modernisation Committee report and Labour Members will have a free vote on the issues later.

Mr. Forth: Will the Minister remind us who chairs the Modernisation Committee?

Mr. Twigg: My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House chairs the Committee. However, if the right hon. Gentleman looks at the report, he will see that there was cross-party support.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): It was not supported by the official Opposition, whom I represented on that Committee.

Mr. Twigg: I accept that, but the former right hon. Member for East Devon, Sir Peter Emery, who was a highly respected Conservative Back Bench, did support the report, and therefore, there was cross-Bench support. The hon. Lady is right to say that there was no Opposition Front-Bench support.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: If it is right that this is not Government business and is entirely a House of Commons matter, it does not matter if it runs beyond 7 o'clock. It is in the House's hands. It is no skin off the Government's nose. We could just bring it back on another day for the mutual convenience of all hon. Members.

Mr. Twigg: It is a matter for the House and, if a majority in the House share that opinion, it will be reflected in the vote on the business motion. I reject the charge that by tabling the business motion we are showing contempt for the House. We have allocated a full day for this discussion and there have been no Government statements. Previous similar subjects have been granted only half a day. My feeling is that the House wants to get on and discuss the substantive matters.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 307, Noes 118.

Division No. 5]

[2.13 pm]

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene (Paisley N)	Bryant, Chris
Ainger, Nick	Buck, Ms Karen
Allan, Richard	Burden, Richard
Allen, Graham	Burgon, Colin
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary	Burnham, Andy
Atherton, Ms Candy	Cable, Dr Vincent
Atkins, Charlotte	Cairns, David
Austin, John	Campbell, Alan (Tynemouth)
Bailey, Adrian	Campbell, Mrs Anne (C'bridge)
Baird, Vera	Campbell, Ronnie (Blyth V)
Barnes, Harry	Caplin, Ivor
Barron, Kevin	Caton, Martin
Battle, John	Cawsey, Ian
Bayley, Hugh	Challen, Colin
Beard, Nigel	Chapman, Ben (Wirral S)
Begg, Miss Anne	Clark, Dr Lynda
Beith, Rt Hon A J	(Edinburgh Pentlands)
Bell, Stuart	Clark, Paul (Gillingham)
Benn, Hilary	Clarke, Charles (Norwich S)
Bennett, Andrew	Clarke, Rt Hon Tom (Coatbridge)
Benton, Joe	Clarke, Tony (Northampton S)
Berry, Roger	Clwyd, Ann
Best, Harold	Colley, Ms Ann
Betts, Clive	Coleman, Iain
Blackman, Liz	Coleman, Tony
Blizzard, Bob	Connarty, Michael
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul	Cook, Rt Hon Robin (Livingston)
Borrow, David	Cooper, Yvette
Bradley, Peter (The Wrekin)	Corston, Jean
Brake, Tom	Cotter, Brian
Breed, Colin	Cousins, Jim
Brinton, Mrs Helen	Cranston, Ross
Brooke, Annette	Cruddas, Jon
Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas	Cryer, John (Hornchurch)
(Newcastle E & Wallsend)	Cunningham, Jim (Cov'try S)
Browne, Desmond	Cunningham, Tony (Workington)

Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
 Davey, Valerie (Bristol W)
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint (Croydon C)
 Dawson, Hilton
 Dean, Mrs Janet
 Dhanda, Parmjit
 Dobbin, Jim
 Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
 Donohoe, Brian H
 Doran, Frank
 Doughty, Sue
 Drew, David
 Drown, Ms Julia
 Eagle, Angela (Walsley)
 Eagle, Maria (Lpool Garston)
 Efford, Clive
 Elman, Mrs Louise
 Ennis, Jeff
 Farrelly, Paul
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fillemons, Mrs Lorna
 Flint, Caroline
 Follett, Barbara
 Foster, Rt Hon Derek
 Foster, Don (Bath)
 Foster, Michael (Worcester)
 Foster, Michael Jabez (Hastings)
 Francis, Dr Hywel
 Galloway, George
 Gapes, Mike
 Gerrard, Neil
 Gibson, Dr Ian
 Gidley, Sandra
 Gilroy, Linda
 Goggins, Paul
 Griffiths, Jane (Reading E)
 Griffiths, Win (Bridgend)
 Grogan, John
 Hain, Peter
 Hamilton, Fabian (Leeds NE)
 Hanson, David
 Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
 Harris, Tom (Glasgow Cathcart)
 Havard, Dai
 Healey, John
 Heath, David
 Henderson, Doug (Newcastle N)
 Henderson, Ivan (Harrow W)
 Hendrick, Mark
 Heppell, John
 Hesford, Stephen
 Hayes, David
 Hill, Keith
 Hinchliffe, David
 Holmes, Paul
 Hood, Jimmy
 Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, George (Knowsley N)
 Hoyle, Lindsay
 Hughes, Beverley (Stretford)
 Hughes, Kevin (Doncaster N)
 Humble, Mrs Joan
 Hurst, Alan
 Iddon, Dr Brian
 Illesley, Eric
 Jackson, Glenda (Hampstead)
 Jackson, Helen (Hillsborough)
 Jamieson, David

Jenkins, Brian
 Johnson, Miss Melanie
 (Welwyn Hatfield)
 Jones, Helen (Warrington N)
 Jones, Jon Owen (Cardiff C)
 Jones, Kevan (N Durham)
 Jones, Lynne (Selly Oak)
 Jones, Martyn (Clwyd S)
 Jowell, Rt Hon Tessa
 Joyce, Eric
 Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
 Keeble, Ms Sally
 Keen, Alan (Feltham & Heston)
 Keen, Ann (Brentford & Isleworth)
 Kelly, Ruth
 Kemp, Fraser
 Kidney, David
 Kilfoyle, Peter
 King, Andy (Rugby & Kenilworth)
 King, Ms Oona (Bethnal Green)
 Kirkwood, Archy
 Knight, Jim (S Dorset)
 Kumar, Dr Ashok
 Ladyman, Dr Stephen
 Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
 Laxton, Bob
 Lepper, David
 Leslie, Christopher
 Levitt, Tom
 Lewis, Ivan (Bury S)
 Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
 Linton, Martin
 Lloyd, Tony
 Llywd, Elyn
 Love, Andrew
 Lucas, Ian
 Luke, Iain
 Lyons, John
 McAvo, Thomas
 McCabe, Stephen
 McDonnell, John
 McFall, John
 McGuire, Mrs Anne
 McIsaac, Shona
 McKechin, Ann
 McKenna, Rosemary
 Mackinlay, Andrew
 MacTaggart, Fiona
 McWalter, Tony
 McWilliam, John
 Mahmood, Khalid
 Mahon, Mrs Alice
 Mallaber, Judy
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Gordon (Blackpool S)
 Marshall, David (Shettleston)
 Martlew, Eric
 Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
 Miller, Andrew
 Mitchell, Austin (Gt Grimsby)
 Moffatt, Laura
 Moran, Margaret
 Morgan, Julie
 Mountford, Kali
 Mullin, Chris
 Munn, Ms Meg
 Murphy, Jim (Eastwood)
 Murphy, Rt Hon Paul (Torteen)
 Naysmith, Dr Doug
 Norris, Dan
 O'Brien, Bill (Normanton)
 O'Brien, Mike (N Warks)
 Oiler, Bill
 O'Neill, Martin
 Osborne, Sandra (Ayr)

Owen, Albert
 Palmer, Dr Nick
 Perham, Linda
 Picking, Anne
 Pickthall, Colin
 Pike, Peter
 Plaskitt, James
 Pope, Greg
 Pound, Stephen
 Prentice, Ms Bridget (Lewisham E)
 Prentice, Gordon (Pendle)
 Prosser, Gwyn
 Purchase, Ken
 Purnell, James
 Quinn, Lawrie
 Rammell, Bill
 Rapson, Syd
 Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
 Robertson, Angus (Moray)
 Robertson, John
 (Glasgow Anniesland)
 Rooney, Terry
 Ross, Ernie
 Ruddock, Joan
 Russell, Ms Christine (Chester)
 Ryan, Joan
 Salter, Martin
 Sarwar, Mohammad
 Savidge, Malcolm
 Sedgemore, Brian
 Shaw, Jonathan
 Sheerman, Barry
 Shipley, Ms Debra
 Simon, Siôn
 Simpson, Alan (Nottingham S)
 Skinner, Dennis
 Smith, Rt Hon Andrew (Oxford E)
 Smith, Rt Hon Chris (Islington S)
 Smith, Jacqui (Redditch)
 Smith, Llew (Blaensau Gwent)
 Soley, Clive
 Southworth, Helen
 Squire, Rachel
 Starkey, Dr Phyllis
 Steinberg, Gerry
 Stevenson, George
 Stewart, Ian (Eccles)
 Stinchcombe, Paul
 Stoate, Dr Howard

Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Ms Gisela
 Stunell, Andrew
 Sutcliffe, Gerry
 Tami, Mark
 Taylor, Rt Hon Ann (Dewsbury)
 Taylor, Ms Dari (Stockton S)
 Taylor, David (NW Leics)
 Taylor, Matthew (Truro)
 Thomas, Gareth (Clwyd W)
 Thomas, Gareth R (Harrow W)
 Thomas, Simon (Ceredigion)
 Thurso, John
 Tipping, Paddy
 Todd, Mark
 Truswell, Paul
 Turner, Dennis (Wolverhampton SE)
 Turner, Dr Desmond (Kemptown)
 Turner, Neil (Wigan)
 Twigg, Derek (Haltom)
 Twigg, Stephen (Enfield)
 Tyler, Paul
 Tynan, Bill
 Walley, Ms Joan
 Ward, Ms Claire
 Watson, Tom
 Watts, David
 White, Brian
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Wicks, Malcolm
 Williams, Rt Hon Alan
 (Swansea W)
 Williams, Mrs Betty (Conwy)
 Williams, Hywel (Caernarfon)
 Willis, Phil
 Winnick, David
 Winterton, Ms Rosie (Doncaster C)
 Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Woolas, Phil
 Worthington, Tony
 Wright, David (Telford)
 Wright, Tony (Carnock)
 Wyatt, Derek
 Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mr. Tony McNulty and
 Mr. Ian Pearson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter (E Surrey)
 Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
 Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
 Atkinson, Peter (Hexham)
 Bacon, Richard
 Baldry, Tony
 Barker, Greg
 Baron, John
 Bellingham, Henry
 Bercow, John
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boswell, Tim
 Brady, Graham
 Brazier, Julian
 Browning, Mrs Angela
 Burnett, John
 Burt, Alistair
 Butterfill, John
 Cameron, David
 Cash, William
 Chope, Christopher
 Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth
 (Rushcliffe)
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Collins, Tim
 Conway, Derek
 Cormack, Sir Patrick
 Cran, James
 Curry, Rt Hon David
 Djanogly, Jonathan
 Dodds, Nigel
 Durican Smith, Iain
 Duncan, Peter
 Evans, Nigel
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, Michael
 Flight, Howard
 Flook, Adrian
 Forth, Rt Hon Eric
 Francois, Mark
 Gale, Roger
 Gamier, Edward
 George, Andrew (St Ives)
 Gibb, Nick
 Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
 Goodman, Paul
 Grayling, Chris
 Green, Damian (Ashford)
 Grieve, Dominic

Hague, Rt Hon William
 Hawkins, Nick
 Hayes, John
 Heald, Oliver
 Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
 Hendry, Charles
 Hoban, Mark
 Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
 Horam, John
 Howard, Rt Hon Michael
 Howarth, Gerald (Aldershot)
 Jack, Rt Hon Michael
 Jenkin, Bernard
 Kirkbride, Miss Julie
 Lait, Mrs Jacqui
 Lansley, Andrew
 Leigh, Edward
 Lewis, Dr Julian (New Forest E)
 Liddell-Grainger, Ian
 Liddington, David
 Loughton, Tim
 Luff, Peter
 McIntosh, Miss Anne
 Maclean, Rt Hon David
 McLoughlin, Patrick
 Maples, John
 Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
 Mercer, Patrick
 Mitchell, Andrew (Sutton Coldfield)
 Moss, Malcolm
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 O'Brien, Stephen (Eddisbury)
 Opik, Lembit
 Osborne, George (Tatton)
 Page, Richard
 Paterson, Owen
 Portillo, Rt Hon Michael

Prisk, Mark
 Redwood, Rt Hon John
 Robertson, Hugh (Faversham)
 Robertson, Laurence (Tewkesbury)
 Roe, Mrs Marion
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sayeed, Jonathan
 Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
 Shepherd, Richard
 Simmonds, Mark
 Simpson, Keith (Mid-Norfolk)
 Smith, Sir Robert (W Ab'dns)
 Smyth, Rev Martin (Belfast S)
 Spelman, Mrs Caroline
 Spink, Dr Robert
 Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
 Steen, Anthony
 Swayne, Desmond
 Swire, Hugo
 Syme, Robert
 Taylor, Ian (Essex & Walton)
 Taylor, John (Solihull)
 Taylor, Sir Teddy
 Tredinnick, David
 Turner, Andrew (Isle of Wight)
 Watkinson, Angela
 Whittingdale, John
 Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
 Wiggins, Bill
 Wilkinson, John
 Winterton, Mrs Ann (Congleton)
 Winterton, Nicholas (Macclesfield)
 Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:

Mr. John Randall and
 Mr. James Gray.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the name of Mr. Robin Cook relating to Programming of Legislation and Deferred Divisions not later than half-past Six o'clock; and such Questions shall include the Questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and those Questions may be decided, though opposed, after the expiration of the time for opposed business.

Programming of Bills

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): We now come to the main motions. It may be for the convenience of the House if I say that the motion on deferred Divisions may be debated together with the motion on programming of Bills although, of course, there will be scope for separate Divisions. I must also announce to the House that the Speaker has been unable to accept the amendment tabled to the motion on programming.

2.26 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook):

I beg to move,
 That in the current Session of Parliament Orders A to I below shall have effect:

A. Programme Motions

(1) If, before second reading of a bill, notice of a motion providing—

(a) for committal of the bill, and

(b) for any proceedings on the bill to be programmed,

is given by a Minister of the Crown, the motion may be made immediately after second reading, and Standing Order No. 63 shall not apply to the Bill.

(2) Such a motion is to be called a programme motion.

(3) An order made by the House as a result of a programme motion is to be called a programme order.

(4) A motion to vary or supplement a programme order is also to be called a programme motion.

(5) A programme motion may provide for the allocation of time for any proceedings on a bill.

(6) Except in the following three cases, or where paragraph (8) of Programme Order B (Programming Committees) applies, the question on a programme motion is to be put forthwith.

(7) The first exception is where—

(a) a Standing Committee has reported a resolution under paragraph (11) of Sessional Order C (Programming Sub-Committees) proposing an alteration of the date by which the bill is to be reported to the House, and

(b) the motion made under paragraph (12) of Sessional Order C (Programming Sub-Committees) does not give effect to the Standing Committee's proposal.

(8) The second exception is where the motion makes further provision for proceedings on consideration and third reading of the bill otherwise than in accordance with a resolution of a Programming Committee under paragraph (5) of Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) or a resolution of a Standing Committee under paragraph (13) of Sessional Order C (Programming Sub-Committees).

(9) The third exception is where the motion reduces the amount of time allocated under a programme order for any proceedings on the bill (whether or not it also increases the amount of time allocated for other proceedings on the bill).

(10) In an excepted case, any question necessary to dispose of proceedings on a programme motion is to be put not later than three-quarters of an hour after the commencement of proceedings on the motion.

(11) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted Business) applies to proceedings on a programme motion.

(12) Standing Order No. 83 (Allocation of Time) does not apply to a programme motion.

(13) If a programme order applies to a bill, neither Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) nor Standing Order No. 120 (Business Sub-Committee) applies to the bill.

B. Programming Committees

(1) This order applies if proceedings in committee of the whole House or on consideration and third reading are subject to a programme order.

(2) There is to be a committee for the bill consisting of—

(a) the Chairman of Ways and Means (who is to be chairman of the committee); and

(b) not more than eight other Members, nominated by the Speaker.

(3) The committee is to be called the Programming Committee.

(4) The quorum of the Programming Committee is four.

(5) The Programming Committee shall consider the allocation of time to proceedings in committee of the whole House or on consideration and third reading and report any resolution which it makes to the House.

(6) Proceedings in the Programming Committee shall be brought to a conclusion not later than two hours after their commencement.

(7) For the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (6), the chairman shall—

(a) first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided; and

(b) then put successively questions on any motions made by a Minister of the Crown.

(8) On a motion being made in the House relating to a resolution of the Programming Committee, any question necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion shall be put not later than three-quarters of an hour after the commencement of those proceedings.

(9) If such a motion is agreed to, its provisions shall have effect as if they were included in the programme order for the bill.

(10) Proceedings on a motion made under paragraph (8) may be entered upon and decided, though opposed, at any hour.

(11) Resolutions of the Programming Committee—

(a) may be reported from time to time; and

(b) subject to the powers of the Speaker or Chairman to select the amendments, new clauses and new schedules to be proposed, may include alterations in the order in which specified proceedings on the bill are to be taken.

C. Programming Sub-Committees (1) If a bill is subject to a programme order which commits it to a standing committee, the order stands referred to the committee and shall be considered by a sub-committee of the committee.

(2) The sub-committee is to be called the Programming Sub-Committee.

(3) The Programming Sub-Committee shall consist of—

(a) the chairman or one of the chairmen of the committee (who is to be chairman of the sub-committee); and

(b) seven members of the committee, nominated by the Speaker.

(4) The quorum of the Programming Sub-Committee is four.

(5) The Programming Sub-Committee shall report to the committee any resolution which it makes about—

(a) the number of sittings to be allotted to the consideration of the bill in the committee;

(b) the allocation of the proceedings to each sitting;

(c) the time at which any proceedings, if not previously concluded, are to be brought to a conclusion;

(d) the date by which the bill is to be reported to the House;

(e) the programming of consideration and third reading.

(6) Proceedings in the Programming Sub-Committee shall be brought to a conclusion not later than two hours after their commencement.

(7) For the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (6), the chairman shall—

(a) first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet been decided; and

(b) then put forthwith successively questions on any motions made by a Minister of the Crown.

(8) Resolutions of the Programming Sub-Committee—

(a) may be reported from time to time; and

(b) subject to the powers of the chairman to select the amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be proposed, may include alterations in the order in which specified proceedings are to be taken.

(9) On a motion in the terms of a resolution of the Programming Sub-Committee being made in the committee, any question necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion is to be put not later than half an hour after the commencement of those proceedings.

(10) If the provisions of a resolution of the Programming Sub-Committee under sub-paragraphs (a), (b) or (c) of paragraph (5) are agreed to (with or without modification) by the committee, the provisions (or the provisions as modified) are to have effect as if they were included in the programme order for the bill.

(11) Any resolution of the committee—

(a) proposing an alteration to the date by which the Bill is to be reported to the House; or

(b) making a recommendation about the programming of the Bill on consideration and third reading;

shall be reported to the House.

(12) If a resolution is reported proposing an alteration to the date by which the Bill is to be reported to the House, a supplemental programme motion shall be set down for a day not later than the fifth sitting day after the day when the report was made which may—

(a) give effect to the Committee's proposal;

(b) otherwise alter or supplement the provisions of the original programme of the bill; or

(c) confirm the date set in the original programme order for the bill.

(13) If a resolution is reported making a recommendation about the programming of the Bill on consideration and third reading, a supplemental programme motion shall be set down before the consideration of the bill on report which may—

(a) give effect to the Committee's recommendations;

(b) otherwise alter or supplement the provisions of the original programme of the bill; or

(c) confirm the original programme order for the bill.

D. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings in Standing Committee or in Committee of the whole House

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings in standing committee or in committee of the whole House to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The chairman shall put forthwith the following questions (but no others)—

(a) any question already proposed from the chair;

(b) any question necessary to bring to a decision a question so proposed;

(c) the question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the chairman for separate division;

(d) the question on any amendment moved or motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(3) On a motion made for a new clause or a new schedule, the chairman shall put only the question that the clause or schedule be added to the bill.

(4) If two or more questions would fall to be put under paragraph (2)(d) on successive amendments moved or motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the chairman shall instead put a single question in relation to those amendments or motions.

(5) If two or more questions would fall to be put under paragraph (2)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the bill, the chairman shall instead put a single question in relation to those provisions.

(6) On conclusion of the proceedings in a committee, the chairman shall report the bill (or such of the bill's provisions as were committed to it) to the House without putting any question.

E. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration or third reading

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings on consideration and third reading to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall put forthwith the following questions (but no others)—

- (a) any question already proposed from the chair;
- (b) any question necessary to bring to a decision a question so proposed;
- (c) the question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the Speaker for separate division;
- (d) the question on any amendment moved or motion made by a Minister of the Crown;
- (e) any other question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(3) On a motion made for a new clause or a new schedule, the Speaker shall put only the question that the clause or schedule be added to the bill.

(4) If two or more questions would fall to be put under paragraph (2)(d) on successive amendments moved or motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Speaker shall instead put a single question in relation to those amendments or motions.

F. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided.

(3) If that question is for the amendment of a Lords Amendment, the Speaker shall then put forthwith—

- (a) a single question on any further amendments of the Lords Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown; and
- (b) the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(4) The Speaker shall then put forthwith—

- (a) a single question on any amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown to a Lords Amendment; and
- (b) the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House disagrees with the Lords in a Lords Amendment.

(6) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question that this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Amendments.

(7) As soon as the House has—

- (a) agreed or disagreed with the Lords in any of their Amendments; or
- (b) disposed of an amendment relevant to a Lords Amendment which has been disagreed to,

the Speaker shall put forthwith a single question on any amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown relevant to the Lords Amendment.

G. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings on any further message from the Lords to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided.

(3) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown which is related to the question already proposed from the chair.

(4) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown on or relevant to any of the remaining items in the Lords message.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question that this House agrees with the Lords in all of the remaining Lords proposals.

H. Programme orders: Reasons Committee

(1) This order applies in relation to any Committee to be appointed to draw up Reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the appointment, nomination and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the appointment of its chairman.

(3) The Committee shall report before the conclusion of the sitting at which it is appointed.

(4) Proceedings in the Committee shall be brought to a conclusion not later than half an hour after their commencement.

(5) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (4), the chairman shall—

- (a) first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided; and
- (b) then put forthwith successively questions on motions which may be made by a Minister of the Crown for assigning a Reason for disagreeing with the Lords in any of their Amendments.

(6) The proceedings of the Committee shall be reported without any further question being put.

I. Programme orders: supplementary provisions

(1) The provisions of this order apply to proceedings in the House or in Committee of the whole House on a bill which is subject to a programme order.

(2) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) applies to the proceedings for any period after ten o'clock (or on Thursday, seven o'clock) allocated to them in accordance with the programme order.

(3) The proceedings may not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(4) If, on a day on which the bill has been set down to be taken as an order of the day, a motion for the adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration) would, apart from this order, stand over to Seven o'clock—

- (a) that motion stands over until the conclusion of any proceedings on the bill which, in accordance with the programme order, are to be brought to conclusion at or before that time; and
- (b) the bringing to a conclusion of any proceedings on the bill which, in accordance with the programme order, are to be brought to a conclusion after that time is postponed for a period of time equal to the duration of the proceedings on that motion.

(5) If a day on which the bill has been set down to be taken as an order of the day is one to which a motion for the adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 24 stands over from an earlier day, the bringing to a conclusion of any proceedings on the

bill which, in accordance with the programme order, are to be brought to a conclusion on that day is postponed for a period equal to the duration of the proceedings on that motion.

(6) No dilatory motion may be made in relation to the proceedings except by a Minister of the Crown; and the question on any such motion is to be put forthwith.

(7) If at any sitting the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the expiry of the period at the end of which proceedings are to be brought to a conclusion under a programme order, no notice is required of a motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of the programme order.

It might help the House if, before I turn to the substance of the motion before us, I respond to some of the comments that have just been made.

First, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) asked whether the motion had been before any Committee of the House. Motions that are before the House this afternoon flow from the recommendations of the Modernisation Committee in two successive reports, and fairly faithfully carry through the recommendations of both those reports.

Secondly, the terms of the motions before us are very close to those of the motions that the House has debated previously. The first, on programming, is similar to the one carried in the last Session; the second, on deferred Divisions, is identical. The only difference between the debates on the motions that we have debated in the past and tonight's debate is that the time for tonight's debate is longer than the time for debate when the House last passed these motions. When it last debated them, it did so on a half day, starting at 7 pm. On this occasion, because of the importance of these issues and because hon. Members would wish to express themselves, we have allowed a full day for debate.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): But the right hon. Gentleman will observe that the programming motion now before the House provides that programme motions will be put to the vote immediately, and we shall not be able to debate them for 45 minutes as we were able to do in the last Parliament. Moreover, there is no point in saying that there was all-party agreement to the report because, had the right hon. Gentleman been in the House, attending the debates in the last Parliament, he would have known full well that programming motions were resisted on every occasion. I made more than 12 speeches opposing them.

Mr. Cook: I think that the right hon. and learned Gentleman can take some credit for having been one of the reasons that persuaded the great majority of the members of the Modernisation Committee, in their last report, to propose that those programming motions should be taken forthwith. I did say—

Mr. Hogg: Why?

Mr. Cook: I will turn to the issue of substance later, but I said at the start of my comments that the motions before the House faithfully include the recommendations of the Modernisation Committee, of which—the right hon. and learned Gentleman is right—that was one.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman raised, in the course of the previous discussion, the proposal that, when there is before the House a motion that is necessarily

technical and legalistic, it should be accompanied by an explanatory memorandum, setting out the purpose of the motion. That is a worthwhile proposal. In future, I shall endeavour to ensure that that is met on the Order Paper, although on this occasion I shall have to attempt to explain it in my speech.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): The right hon. Gentleman told my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) that it was his participation in 12 debates that led the Modernisation Committee to its conclusions, but that is not the case. One of my objections to the way in which that Committee dealt with the matter is that it made no analysis of the way in which programming motions were debated in the previous Session.

Mr. Cook: Other members of the Modernisation Committee will be able to respond to the hon. Lady's comments on the way in which it reached its conclusions. I am sorry if she is going to deny the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) the benefit of being able to claim the credit for the change.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): My right hon. Friend mentioned previous reports of the Select Committee on Modernisation. I have only had a chance to look at the report on the programming of legislation. It does not seem to include all the items that are before us today. For example, has the proposal that Lords amendments and Government motions to disagree with them should be taken forthwith without any debate been considered previously?

Mr. Cook: It is fair to say that the Modernisation Committee's report is brief and does not go into the full detail necessary for the resolution that is put before the House. That proposal is entirely consistent with the policy proposal of the Committee.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose*—

Mr. Cook: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman on this occasion; I never wish to disappoint him. However, I must then make some progress.

Mr. Bercow: I am much obliged to the right hon. Gentleman for his gracious protection of my interests, but I am sorry to have to say that his flippant response to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) betrays an ignorance of the history of the dispute on this matter, that is to his enduring discredit. Is he not aware that in the previous Parliament there was continuous dispute about the operations of the Programming Sub-Committees and programming motions on the Floor of the House, and that his hon. Friend the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping)—an assiduous performer at the Dispatch Box, who is sadly no longer a member of the Government—undertook, with the support of his boss, the then Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Derby, South (Margaret Beckett), on a number of occasions to review the operation of those matters. Has the Leader of the House forgotten, or did he not know?

Mr. Cook: Of course, these will never be matters on which it is easy to form a consensus. I wish it were

otherwise. Different views will be taken on a programming motion. However, it is hard to see why on every occasion in the previous Parliament—despite the fact that the Programming Sub-Committee may sometimes have reached a conclusion that was acceptable to many of its members—the motion was contentious.

Perhaps I may try to restore a sense of perspective to the debate.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: I wish to make some progress, but I will happily give way when I have made this point.

The motions put before the House give effect to proposals of the Modernisation Committee that remain experimental. That is why they were temporary in the previous Session and why they must both be renewed. Both will be reviewed at the end of this Session. I invite hon. Members, therefore, to recognise that this is not the seismic debate that some people attempted to describe in which we are setting aside centuries of tradition and of the rights of Members. This is an experiment to make the proceedings of the House more effective, which the House itself will have ample opportunity to review and reconsider on a future occasion.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The right hon. Gentleman is beginning what I hope will be a long and illustrious tenure of an important office. Does he accept that the Modernisation Committee is discredited in the eyes of many Members of Parliament because it is chaired by the Leader of the House? If it were chaired by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), or even—dare I say it?—by me, it would command much greater cross-party support for its proposals. I urge the right hon. Gentleman seriously to consider his position with regard to that Committee. If it produced proposals that were truly cross-party, there would not be much objection from most Conservative Members.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman has made one of the most gracious pleas for a post that I have heard. I shall bear his volunteering in mind. As I told the House, it is important that as the Leader of the House I should take a close, personal interest in the Modernisation Committee and be involved in its decisions. Also, the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of how the Committee arrives at its recommendations is not borne out by the nature of the conclusions of the report. There is no evidence that—

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) *rose*—

Mr. Cook: I will not give way. I am still responding to the hon. Gentleman's hon. Friend on the Back Benches. I have to defend the rights of Back Benchers in the House, too. There is no evidence in the report that my predecessor manipulated the Modernisation Committee or imposed a conclusion on it. Indeed, the initial recommendation for programme motions was unanimous on the part of the Committee—including all the then Conservative members of the Committee.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Can I confirm, as a member of the Committee, that although the details of the

motion have obviously come from the right hon. Gentleman's office, the father of the idea behind it was certainly the former Member for East Devon, Sir Peter Emery, who was a distinguished Member and who chaired the Procedure Committee for some time? In due modesty, it is also fair to say that I share some responsibility as a godparent with the hon. Member for Hove (Mr. Caplin). So the proposals were the result of an all-party approach. That does not mean that I take responsibility for the motion, but it would be a gross calumny to suggest that somehow the proposals have simply emanated from the Government.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for pointing out that the parentage of this project is shared by many hon. Members of all parties. I had it in mind to pay tribute to Sir Peter Emery and am pleased to echo what the hon. Gentleman said—that after many years of distinguished service in and experience of the House, he was able to participate fully in some of the radical proposals for modernising our procedures.

The motion on deferred Divisions, which is the second on the Order Paper, is identical to the motion that the House considered in the previous Session. It flows from the proposal of the Modernisation Committee, which reasonably justified it on the basis that it would

"allow Members to debate business after 10 pm without requiring other Members who did not wish to take part in the debate to remain in the building late at night waiting for a division which might in the event not take place."

The experiment on deferred Divisions has already shown one clear result: many more Members are able to vote—*[Interruption.]* I honestly do not know why Conservative Members, who were complaining earlier about low turnout, should find it hilarious that the procedure allows more Members to participate in decision making. The more Members participate, the more we can be confident that the decision represents the considered judgment of the House.

Mrs. Browning: The reference is presumably to Members for whom it is convenient to attend only on a Wednesday afternoon. How has the Prime Minister's voting record improved since deferred voting?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Lady can certainly pursue that matter with me and I will happily write and advise her. I must confess—this may be a failing on my part—that I cannot share with her the voting record of every one of the 659 Members of this House, including the Prime Minister.

I draw the hon. Lady's attention, however, to the vote on 19 December on child support. In the deferred Division on that vote, 522 Members voted aye and only five voted no. If we had not had the deferred Division arrangement on that occasion those five Members would have kept more than 500 here until midnight to record their view. As a result of the deferred Division, those five Members were able to express their view and the Members who opposed them could also all take part in the vote, when many of them would not have been able to do so had it not been for that arrangement.

It is very difficult not to reach an interim conclusion that deferred Divisions have suited the interests of hon. Members and enabled many more of them to take part. *[Interruption.]* I remind the Opposition Members who are

[Mr. Cook]

speaking from sedentary positions that not all 522 Members took the Labour Whip, so plainly the arrangement was of benefit to many Members other than those on the Government Benches.

The other motion provides for the continuation of the experiment with programme motions. The Modernisation Committee twice recommended doing so in the previous Session. On the first occasion, it did so by consensus, but I fully concede that it did so on the second occasion without the support of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) and another Conservative Member. It is worth recalling that when the Modernisation Committee first, by consensus, recommended programming motions, it explicitly did so because it believed that they would improve the House's capacity to scrutinise legislation.

Let us be honest and realistic. Before programming, Governments of both colours—certainly including the Government who preceded us in office for 18 years—got their legislation by guillotine: a crude device, by which the first half dozen clauses in a Bill might be debated at great length and, frankly, with a lot of time wasting in the process, with the result that there was enforced silence on subsequent clauses. That does not tend towards the effective scrutiny of the whole Bill and of Government legislation. That is why the Modernisation Committee recommended programming and said in its report that it was doing so because it would benefit Opposition parties and Back Benchers, who would have a greater opportunity to debate and vote on the issues of most concern to them.

Mr. Keyin Hughes (Doncaster, North): I should like to try to solicit an assurance from my right hon. Friend. As he knows, until a few weeks ago, I was part of the usual channels. I guess that I am now part of the unusual channels. I had the privilege of whipping five major Bills through the House for the Government. On each occasion, I managed to reach an agreement with the Opposition Whips on timetabling in Committee and on Report and Third Reading, and I think that that worked very successfully. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Government attach timetable motions to Bills only when they cannot secure an agreement with the Opposition?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend asks a question that I was asked at business questions last week by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), who invited me to show good will by not programming every Bill. As I told him at the time, good will has to be a two-way street, and it is sometimes not easy to find that good will or common sense. Indeed, there was a classic case in the previous Parliament, when the Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Act 2000—an unobjectionable, even tedious measure—took longer to be considered on the Floor of the House during its remaining stages than was taken in Committee, thus prompting a guillotine.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West) rose—

Mr. Cook: Let me finish the point. [Interruption.] We had several hours' debate on the Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Act 2000 and I do not propose to reopen the matter. Although I would not necessarily expect to carry the hon. Gentleman with me in a spirit of consensus,

I understand that this is a new Parliament and that hon. Members have a new spirit, so I am willing to attempt an experiment in finding out whether such good will can be reciprocated.

Mr. Swayne: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: No, I will not. The Homelessness Bill will be the first Bill to receive its Second Reading next week. May I tell my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes) and the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire that it is not our intention to move a programme motion on the Second Reading of that Bill? It is a short Bill and similar clauses were debated in full in the previous Parliament. It is not particularly contentious. Indeed, it has support in all parties. That will be a fair opportunity to test whether the good will exists to enable serious scrutiny of Bills without programme motions, rather than frivolous time wasting. I assure my hon. Friend that if the good will exists to proceed by agreement and consensus, without a programme motion, we can renew that experiment on a future occasion.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Cook: I give way to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), in the interests of his own health.

Mr. Swayne: Will the right hon. Gentleman abandon the practice, which was common when the experiment began in the previous Parliament, of publishing the programme motion before the Government have even heard the Second Reading debate? It was absurd and insulting that the Government could decide what the outcome of the programme motion should be without actually having tested the opinion of the House or found out what issues would be raised on Second Reading. Good will would be generated if the right hon. Gentleman were to abandon that practice.

Mr. Cook: I am very glad to hear the hon. Gentleman's last sentence, because I think that I can help him. The effect of our motion on programming would indeed be to introduce a programme motion on Second Reading—I shall explain why in a moment—but it also introduces an innovation: in response to the Modernisation Committee recommendation, the Standing Committee considering a Bill may recommend a later out date than that set at the time of Second Reading.

Under the motion on programming that the House is invited to consider, if the Standing Committee makes a recommendation, the Government will be obliged to table that recommendation, which will be taken forthwith. However, if the Government reject the Standing Committee recommendation and table a different out date, it will be debatable. That would give the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) an opportunity to address the House at length, which is a strong incentive to the Government to accept the Standing Committee recommendation and deal with it forthwith.

I can respond to the concern expressed by the hon. Member for New Forest, West by saying that if those dealing with the Bill conclude that the out date set at Second Reading is unreasonable, it can be changed by a

resolution of the House. The Government will be obliged to table the necessary motion, but the House will take a decision on it.

Mr. Hogg: The Standing Committee will be dominated by the Government.

Mr. Cook: The right hon. and learned Gentleman appears to challenge the fact that the Standing Committee will have a Government majority. I can do nothing about the fact that the Government have a majority. Indeed, if I were to do so, it would be an affront to parliamentary democracy because it would not only deny the Government their policy, but deny the will of the majority of the House of Commons.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Cook: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike).

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): I understand why my right hon. Friend refers to good will and moving in that direction. I have considered such matters seriously for several years and have been involved in the modernisation process since it began. Despite what the official Opposition or any other party may say, they can destroy good will at the drop of a hat. We must ensure that legislation makes sensible progress and that all the clauses of a Bill are scrutinised. From day one, the Modernisation Committee's objective has been to introduce sensible programme motions that allow debates on all the clauses that need to be debated and opposition from either side of the House to be considered properly.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend expresses the view, which is held by several hon. Members, not just those on the Government Benches, that every Bill should be programmed. I am willing to attempt the experiment to discover what happens when we do not programme a Bill, but I agree with him that not only good will but discipline and self-restraint are required from all hon. Members if the House is to carry out its task of scrutiny.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I urge some caution in the course of action that my right hon. Friend proposes. I can recall several occasions in the previous Parliament when agreement on an unofficial timetable for a Bill was reached through the usual channels. However, it seems that Opposition Whips were not able to control Opposition Back Benchers—[*Interruption.*] and that often led to time-wasting and very late nights for all of us.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend will welcome the fact that her proposition that the Opposition Whips were unable to control members of their party was heartily endorsed by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. Voluntary agreements are meaningful only if all members of the parties that reach them abide by them and support their Front-Bench spokesmen in such agreements.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Cook: I will give way to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), but then I must make some progress because I have not even finished answering the question put by the hon. Member for New Forest, West.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am a member of the Modernisation Committee which produced

the report on which the Standing Orders that we are considering today are based. Will the Leader of the House confirm that paragraphs 4 and 5 of the report are fully taken into account in the Standing Order changes that we are discussing? Is he prepared to highlight the importance of the position of the Chairmen of Standing Committees, who could come from any of the parties in the House? They chair the Programming Sub-Committees. As they are pledged to impartiality, the Chairmen will take into account the interests of the House as a whole in the scrutiny of the legislation.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, on which I am happy to reassure him. The motion endeavours to give effect to paragraphs 4 and 5 of the report. I apologise to the House for the fact that giving effect to the dozen lines of those paragraphs requires so much legal jargon.

I explained to the hon. Member for New Forest, West that the motion contains a provision for the Standing Committee to recommend a different out date, and that under the terms of the motion the Government must table that proposal within five sitting days. The motion contains a further provision; the Standing Committee will propose the length of the remaining stages and the allocation of time within that.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield is right to say that the Programming Sub-Committee that makes the recommendation to the Standing Committee will be chaired by the Chair of the Standing Committee. That will bring an impartial and independent element to the discussion and he or she will be responsible for safeguarding the interests of the Opposition and Back Benchers. I know that the Chairman of Ways and Means takes a particular interest in the important role of the Chairmen of Standing Committees in chairing the Programming Sub-Committees.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): The hon. Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes) was an excellent member of the usual channels when he and I piloted the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill through Committee. We agreed at the start, with no timetable, that the Bill should come out of Committee six weeks later. It came out exactly on the dot. It would be a more sensible procedure not to timetable debates on Second Reading or in Committee. It is in Committee that omissions and lacunae in Bills are often exposed. It could then be decided whether it was necessary or desirable from the Government's point of view to timetable the remaining stages.

Mr. Cook: In fairness to the House, it is helpful to the House if the Government are transparent and open about their target date for concluding the Committee proceedings. Let us get real. Every Government have always had a target date for the conclusion of Committee stages. I suspect that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) will be able to confirm that. The programme motion on Second Reading makes transparent the target date so that every hon. Member—not only the Official Opposition, but Back Benchers and members of the other parties—knows it.

The motion before us today contains an innovation and improvement on last year's practice. If the Standing Committee becomes persuaded that the out date is

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unrealistic and that other matters need to be examined, it will be within its power to recommend a later out date. The Government must then put that before the House.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): I commend the spirit in which my right hon. Friend is dealing with the points raised by hon. Members on both sides of the House. It augurs well for what might occur during the rest of the Parliament.

As one who had a PhD in opposition and used to orchestrate during 10 years as Opposition Chief Whip the sort of things that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) gets up to, I must advise my right hon. Friend that we must not be too sanctimonious. Indeed, I know that my right hon. Friend is the last one to be sanctimonious. There were many times when I did not have complete control over my Back Benchers. There were even more times when I pretended not to have control over them and colluded with them in frustrating the Government of the day. Such were the things that went on in this place.

Is not our dilemma that every act of modernisation—I am broadly in favour of what has been done and what is proposed—tends to increase the power of the Executive vis-à-vis Parliament? It is all too easy for Labour Members to want to steamroller all opposition, but we ought to have some consideration because one of these days, not I but some of my colleagues might be in opposition again.

Mr. Cook: I would have appreciated it if sometimes during the 18 years my right hon. Friend had made it clear that he was happy for us to rebel against his instructions. It might have made us easier in our consciences, if not in what we did, if we had been aware of that at the time. I disagree with the conclusion that he draws about the effect of programme motions. They can assist the House in its scrutiny. They enable the House to focus on issues of concern to Back Benchers and Opposition Members, in the full knowledge of what the timetable allows. Members can then resolve to participate in debates on the issues on which they wish to express their views.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Cook: I think that I have already given way to the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham. I will make a special exception and give way for a second time in a moment.

At present, under the threat of guillotine or even in the absence of a guillotine, all Government Back Benchers have to be quiet because there is no time for them to speak. The majority of hon. Members are Labour Members. Under a programme motion, when the timetable and the out date are clear, all hon. Members are free to speak on issues of concern to them.

Mr. Hogg: The right hon. Gentleman will remember from his previous experience in the House that interventions are not confined to one. Will he come back to the point that he made earlier that the purpose of timetabling is to enable Back Benchers to identify the main issues? Surely that is not the case. In the first place, the

Programming Sub-Committee has a quorum of four so it almost certainly will not involve ordinary Back Benchers. In the second place, the motion before the House does not provide for debate on the timetable motion. It provides for the motion to be taken immediately. In other words, Back Benchers are precluded from expressing their view on those parts of the Bill on which they wish to focus or on the length of time to be taken in Committee.

Mr. Cook: The right hon. and learned Gentleman deludes himself if he imagines that many Back Benchers both in the Chamber just now and outside it would not welcome the provision that programme motions be taken forthwith.

Mr. Grieve: The Leader of the House touched on the fact that one of the areas that will be covered by programme motions is the procedure when Bills come back from the House of Lords. How will the system work and be an improvement on the previous system of crude guillotining? For example, the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill enjoyed cross-party support, but we had 666 amendments from the Lords, of which 665 were Government amendments. There was no filibustering, but we had the chance to consider only 80 amendments in the time allocated under the Government's guillotine. One of the direct results was that we had to introduce subsequent legislation to correct the howler in relation to the imprint at the bottom of election literature.

Mr. Cook: A programming motion must reflect the volume of amendments from another place. It can always be updated to take account of that. The Opposition should not pretend that there was a more generous allocation of time for scrutiny when they were in government. In the 1991–92 Session, in their last year in office before the 1992 election, they passed 33 Acts and spent 95 hours on Second Reading, 72 hours for all remaining stages and 696 hours in Standing Committee. In our last year before the 2001 election, we passed 21 Acts. Although that is a much smaller number, they were debated on Second Reading for 110 hours—15 more hours for a fewer number of Acts. The remaining stages took 72 hours—precisely the same as when the Conservatives were in office, although for fewer Bills. The legislation spent 690 hours in Standing Committee, which is less than 1 per cent. less than the time taken in the 1991–92 Session.

By the benchmark that the Conservatives established in office, it is false to say that programming motions result in less time for scrutiny by the House. On the contrary, more time was available, proportionate to the number of Bills considered.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Much of the discussion is about how much time is taken up, which raises the use of filibustering and the extent to which a particular Chairman construes whether that has occurred. I have grave reservations about whether the use of time is the best weapon for the Opposition, because it is better to use argument. However, it is true that the distortions to which the right hon. Gentleman refers are often a reflection of people misusing time and the Chairman not enforcing the rule on filibuster.

Mr. Cook: I do not wish to assent to criticism of the Chair, but I agree that scrutiny can be effectively carried

out by telling argument, not by the length of time that a speech takes. I speak with experience because I spent longer in opposition than any Conservative Member in the Chamber. It is possible for the Opposition to change legislation. The ingredients for successful scrutiny to challenge and change legislation are persuasive argument, mobilisation of the public to express their view and the formation of alliances across the Floor of the House with other Members who can be persuaded to share the same opinion. On that basis, we were sometimes successful in changing legislation while in opposition. I remember forming an alliance, which I can now admit to my hon. Friends, with the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) to amend the Community Care Bill. We did that with the substantial support of the country.

In my long years in opposition, I rarely saw policy or legislation seriously challenged by the wasting of the House's time. The general effect of such activity united those on the Government Benches in their determination to see a measure through. That is the result of much of what the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst does, which is why I tabled a motion today to enable the House to accept the programming motions forthwith as recommended by the Modernisation Committee.

There are no medals for spending long hours in the Chamber; nor does our legislation necessarily benefit from long hours. We sit for longer than most democratic Parliaments and it is not self-evident that the quality of our law making is any better. There is nothing to be proud of in a culture of long hours. In my time, I have put in as many hours as any other hon. Member. Indeed, I was locked in the Library twice when I was shadow health spokesman because the custodian took the reasonable view that, as the House had risen and everyone else had gone home, no one would be in there. I have no objection to Opposition Members staying in the House or Library until they are locked in—indeed, I can arrange that for anyone who volunteers—but there is no reason why those who want to work all hours of the night should be allowed to force the rest of the House to keep them company.

I commend the motion to the House as a valuable foundation for the efficient use of our time and effective scrutiny of Government legislation.

3.5 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): This subject is truly a House of Commons matter. It affects the rights of all Members of Parliament to fulfil the important function of scrutinising legislation and of tabling and debating amendments to ensure that the Executive is held to account.

The right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) made his point well. Although the term "modernisation" is frequently used, what is done in its name does not strengthen Parliament, the Chamber or the rights of hon. Members on both sides of the House to hold the Executive to account. Instead, it strengthens the Executive. Since I became shadow Leader of the House, I have objected strongly, and shall continue to do so until I leave this post, on a point of principle that the so-called Modernisation Committee should be chaired by a Minister—specifically, the Leader of the House, who has a responsibility to protect the rights and duties of Members of Parliament.

The Modernisation Committee under this Government and formed by this Government is no less than a tool of this Government. It is outrageous that it should be used in such a way by them, and by the Leader of the House in particular, to introduce changes that affect the Standing Orders and the rights of the House so that we depart from the tradition of seeking consensus across the House. Consensus should not be sought in just one Committee, because that goes against the grain of what we have always understood to be the rights of hon. Members.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will my hon. Friend confirm that the Liberal Democrats—who now make the ludicrous claim that they are some sort of opposition—have done nothing but work hand in glove with the Government on the Modernisation Committee to contrive to reduce the opportunities available for opposition and have acted as their tool?

Mrs. Browning: As always, my right hon. Friend is right. However, I add a caveat. The new Liberal Democrat Chief Whip for the Modernisation Committee expressed concern about the way in which legislation passed through the House, especially in the previous Parliament. I hope that my right hon. Friend is as hopeful as I am about that development. That Chief Whip was worried, as many of us were, about the guillotining of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill and the fact that more than 600 Lords amendments were not scrutinised by the Chamber. Much of the Bill will need to be tidied up and put right by us because problems were not properly addressed at the time. Indeed, just before the House rose for the general election, the imprints—an important aspect of the Bill—had to be reconsidered.

It is to no one's advantage if legislation is not properly scrutinised and challenged before it becomes an Act. I suspect that much of the legislation that was passed in the previous Parliament will cause great problems, not least because people ask about our intention behind the laws that we enact. If it has not even been scrutinised or debated, if there is no official record of the intent of the House at the time, how can we say that we are the legislators? Once it is seen that Parliament did not address matters, people outside will second-guess its intent. That is not the way in which any legislature should behave.

I say to the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) in all sincerity that it is the job of the Leader of the House to ensure that there are procedures that respect the right of all of us—in government or in opposition or on the Front or Back Benches—not only to challenge the Executive but to do our job in scrutinising and amending legislation.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): Is not there a curiosity in all this? Although the Liberals have indicated their great support for these measures, as they have throughout, when it has come to implementing them, they have voted against every guillotine motion. That is contradictory. That did not enable the Leader of the House to reflect on what was happening in practice and on the fact that our opposition is based on experience, not theory.

Mrs. Browning: That is exactly right. I must at this stage put on record my grateful thanks to my hon. Friend, who has stood shoulder to shoulder with me in the

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Modernisation Committee to try to ensure that those of us who have grave concerns have them put on the record of the Committee's proceedings.

Mr. Cash: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is another substantive point about the chairmanship of the Modernisation Committee? As I said in yesterday's debate on the constitution, and certainly according to past conventions of the House, all Select Committees that are scrutiny Committees should automatically be chaired by an Opposition Member. The Public Accounts Committee is so chaired, although we face a disgraceful situation concerning the European Scrutiny Committee. I have great respect for its Chairman; this is not a personal objection. Am I right that there will not be the independence in Parliament for which people are calling if the naked exercise of power through the Whips and the appointment of Chairmen of those Committees is not sorted out? That is a fundamental question on which the debate should turn.

Mrs. Browning: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Since becoming shadow Leader of the House, I have made that point myself. Indeed, the point is not just that a Select Committee is chaired by a member of the Government—the Leader of the House—but that, interestingly, the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Leader of the House took a place on that Committee. I do not know whether that will be so in future. The Committee is a tool of the Government. It was intended to be so by this Government. This Government intended to ensure that, under the guise of a Select Committee, they could change the Standing Orders. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, given tradition and what we know and understand of Select Committees, it is of course nothing of the sort.

I would not necessarily press for such a Committee to be chaired by a member of the Opposition. I would happily accept a Back-Bench Chairman of any party in the House. The Committee deals with matters to do with the House. It is therefore not just entirely inappropriate but obscene that it is chaired by a member of the Government.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): The hon. Lady is making a great deal of bluster about the Committee and its formulation. Let us consider the points under debate. She is suggesting that the programming of business is worse than the guillotining that her Government undertook. I remember very well from the decade that I spent in opposition the very problems to which she has alluded about tabling many amendments at the last minute and the difficulty of interpreting legislation in the country. We ought to get to the heart of the matter, which is the value of programming business.

Mrs. Browning: I shall come to that in a moment when I will be happy to quote—I am sure that the hon. Lady will be interested to hear it—the letter that I received at the beginning of the year from the then Leader of the House acknowledging that the motions on programming before the House in November, for which, as I recall, the hon. Lady voted enthusiastically, had not worked and that there were great problems. It is only because that went on record that the Modernisation Committee addressed those great problems.

If the hon. Lady really wants to get to the heart of the matter, let us do so. This is not about the rights of Members of Parliament and scrutiny of legislation. We know the Government's view on scrutinising legislation. Owing to their majority, they are prepared to allow Back Benchers constituency weeks away from this place. It is clear that, according to the Government's philosophy, an MP's role is not, as we have always understood it to be, two-fold—to represent one's constituents and ensure that constituency issues are dealt with, and to scrutinise legislation and hold the Executive to account. The Government are enthusiastically changing that role. They did so in the previous Parliament and they are clearly encouraging it in this one. They want to turn everybody into glorified social workers while they dictate how the country will be run.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): In response to what the hon. Lady said about Chairs of Select Committees, does she recall the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) being Chairman of the Health Committee? To his credit, the Government of the day considered him unreliable and he was replaced by another Conservative Member, Sir John Wheeler, who was considered totally safe.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. In the past few minutes, we have been moving away from the substance of the motion to historical tales. I realise that there are connected matters, but we must try to concentrate on the motion before the House.

Mrs. Browning: I shall of course be happy to respond to that intervention in next week's debate, when it would be more appropriate to do so. The hon. Gentleman will not be disappointed by my reply.

Without going through everything that I said when we dealt with deferred Divisions and programme motions in November, as that is on the record, I shall reiterate my key objections to them. First, deferred Divisions divorce the debate from the vote. It is critical that the vote follows the debate. The ballot paper that can be handed in between 3.30 pm and 5 pm could be filled in by any third party anywhere. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] The fact that Labour Members do not think that that is a matter of concern shows clearly that they do not understand the way in which the procedures of the House have developed over many years. They may think that the procedures are old-fashioned and anachronistic, but Members have always been able to go through the Lobby following the debate unencumbered by the influence of any external third party.

I am talking about the sort of third-party influence that was seen in the 19th century—that is going back a bit—which affected the way in which Members voted. [Interruption.] We have procedures in this House as a result of which Members are unencumbered when they vote at the sound of the Division Bell immediately following the debate.

Mrs. Anne Campbell rose—

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Lady is clearly one of those who thinks that it does not matter if a third party has access to a Member when voting. Ballot papers that are available in the morning could be filled in by anybody.

Coercion could be used. A third party could stand over a Member of Parliament while they filled in that ballot paper. Government Members shake their heads, but the freedom and the right of a Member of Parliament to proceed unaccustomed to the Lobby following a debate to make sure that when their vote is cast they are not subject to third-party influence is rooted in history.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend comes to an issue that has done more than any other to lower the House in the country's esteem—the fact that Members of Parliament no longer speak their mind or vote according to their opinion. What she is really saying is that we should diminish the control of party over this place—we should try to diminish the control of the Whips over the party. Does my hon. Friend not agree that we should assert the independence of Back Benchers and the freedom from party control?

Mrs. Browning: Never mind Back Benchers—we should also assert the rights of Front Benchers.

Let me share with the House the results of an experiment that I carried out a little while ago with one of the deferred Divisions: I simply looked at the questions on the paper, filled it in as I thought fit and waited to see what would happen. I am pleased to say that nothing did. The point is that it represents a departure from an important principle—although it might not be important to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell), who is trying to intervene—which is that we discharge our duties in the Division following a debate.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: The hon. Lady is making a wholly spurious point. Every Member of Parliament who goes into the Lobby with a piece of paper is responsible for what is written on that paper. She is trying to pretend otherwise, but her argument has no basis in reality.

Mrs. Browning: There is a distinction to be drawn. Members of Parliament can be faced with multiple votes on a piece of paper, some of which deal with highly emotive issues that attract especially active lobby groups or constituency activists who want to influence the way in which that Member of Parliament votes. It is quite possible that the day will dawn when the public, having finally realised the way in which our voting system has been changed, will demand to see the hon. Lady fill in her ballot paper, and might even stand over while she does it. [HON. MEMBERS: "No!"] Government Members dismiss that scenario, but if they are never subject to third-party influence when they vote, we must all assume that the little notes that they read out so politely during Prime Ministers questions and on every other occasion are not, in fact, written for them by people at Millbank tower. Perhaps the Minister who winds up the debate will tell us whether Millbank tower or the Whips ever issue any direction on how ballot papers are to be filled in.

In some ways, programme motions cause me greater concern. When they were introduced, it was suggested that they would benefit the Opposition—that, provided that a final date was agreed for the Bill to complete its passage, the Opposition and any Labour Back Benchers who were sufficiently strong minded to challenge the Government would have the opportunity in the preceding stages to ensure that proper scrutiny and time were given to challenge the detail of the Bill. However, that is not

what happened after the change was made to our Sessional Orders in November last year. The change was not made to assist either the Opposition or Back Benchers; it was made purely to ensure not only that the Government got their business but that they did so with important parts of legislation being allowed to proceed through both Houses of Parliament without having been properly scrutinised and without the Opposition having been able to challenge the detail or speak to amendments.

I mentioned a letter from the previous Leader of the House, who wrote to me on 30 January:

"You will recall I undertook at business questions . . . in response to Sir Peter Emery, to remind all my Ministerial colleagues of the purpose of the new procedures on programming, given the expressed view from your benches that the Government is not paying sufficient attention to the interests of Opposition parties when establishing programmes for legislation.

I have now done so. In particular, I have stressed that . . . it was agreed that in return for the Government securing each Bill by a particular date, the Opposition parties and other non-Government interests would have the major say in how"—

that word was underlined—

"the available time is used."

Would that that were so. Despite that letter, as legislation proceeded through the House, as Minister after Minister came to the Dispatch Box on Second Reading, and as other Members presided over the Programming Sub-Committees and deliberations in Standing Committee, matters went from bad to worse, culminating in the travesty of proceedings on the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001.

As a result of that, the Modernisation Committee met to recommend further changes. One might have thought that the changes would be designed to make procedures more flexible and to give the House, Back Benchers and the Opposition greater opportunity to challenge and scrutinise. Instead, the Modernisation Committee, chaired by the Leader of the House, produced its first report. As the House will be aware, it contained a memorandum submitted by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) and myself, because neither of us were content with the so-called "repairing" job that that Committee had attempted in order to correct the clear deficiencies in the Orders to which the House agreed in November last year.

I shall not read out the whole memorandum, but I shall repeat some of the points made therein. I should point out that the reason why it was a memorandum and not a minority report was that such are the procedures of the Modernisation Committee that I was prevented from tabling such a report. Because of the shambles resulting from the fact that the rules of that Committee appear to be made up as they go along, I, a member of the official Opposition, was not permitted to table a minority report as I had asked to be allowed to do. Only after my hon. Friend and I insisted were we able to get even a memorandum appended to the report of the Committee. The House will not be surprised to hear me repeat that the Modernisation Committee is a tool of government: it has no interest at all in dissenting views or the views of the official Opposition.

On Second Reading of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, the Minister had stated how many sittings of the Standing Committee he thought would be required, but he reneged on that promise when the Programming Sub-Committee met to discuss the matter. The Standing

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Committee ran out of time to such an extent that, as it reached its final sitting, it had dealt with only 90 of the Bill's 132 clauses. That made it necessary for my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and three other Opposition Members to sit in that Committee and demonstrate their grave concern that its proceedings were to be guillotined and that it was being forced to complete its business without having scrutinised important parts of the Bill.

Mr. Kevin Hughes: Does the hon. Lady agree that we are debating these motions, which I think are unnecessary and inappropriate, not for the sake of proper scrutiny, but because of the time-wasting tactics used by the provisional wing of the Tory party, led by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and others?

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the hon. Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes) to claim that there was time wasting in the Committee that considered the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, given that the Chairman of that Committee made a specific ruling to the effect that there had been no time wasting? In fact, that is the scandal of what occurred.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is a point of argument, not a point of order.

Mrs. Browning: I am happy to say that the *Hansard* Committee record shows that both Chairmen confirmed that there was not time wasting. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) agreed with that. That is mentioned in the memorandum that is attached to the first report of the Modernisation Committee.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend's recollection is a precise and damning indictment of the Government's handling of this sorry saga. Does she recall that the Leader of the House, in one of his attempted purple passages, sought to justify programme motions on the grounds of candour, openness and transparency? Will she confirm that that claim is flatly contradicted by the practice of the Programming Sub-Committees, which do not meet in public, which do not provide a verbatim transcript of their proceedings, and which do not even have the courtesy to provide Members with a minute of their deliberations?

Mrs. Browning: That is right. It is one of my on-going complaints, which I shall reiterate. Such Committees, especially as they have voting rights, should record their deliberations, including voting records.

The hon. Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes) suggested that it was the time-wasting of some Conservative Back Benchers that caused the Modernisation Committee to recommend, and the new Leader of the House to agree, as on the Order Paper, that no longer should the House discuss a programme motion for 45 minutes before it goes to the Programming Sub-Committee. That is a serious misjudgment, for two reasons.

During a Second Reading debate, some of the issues about which there is concern—for example, what might be in the Bill or how it will be taken forward—emerge

only during Back Benchers' representations and contributions. All too often it falls to the Minister who responds to the debate to answer the specific questions that have been raised. It is not until the conclusion of Second Reading that many Back Benchers—it is to be assumed that those who speak on Second Reading often have a particular interest in the subject, and perhaps wish to serve on the Standing Committee—have their specific questions answered.

If Back Benchers hear the answers to their questions in the Minister's response, they will have signs of the sort of issues that will be raised in Committee and the time that will be needed, especially in terms of apportionment between certain parts of the Bill. Some parts will be long in print, but they will not take up too much time in Committee. It is often as a result of detail coming forward from Ministers that many amendments need to be tabled. If the House is to be denied the opportunity of a 45-minute debate—a member of the Committee will not necessarily be a member of the Programming Sub-Committee—Back Benchers on both sides of the House will be denied the opportunity to make their contribution to an important part of the deliberations in Committee.

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North): I thank the hon. Lady for her characteristic generosity in giving way to me and apologise to her for missing the centre portion of her speech.

I feel that someone must come to the defence of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). Does the hon. Lady agree that it is true that he, by his antics over the past year or so, has done far more for the modernisation of this place than serious-minded reformers like myself managed in 14 years or more?

Mrs. Browning: We have a dichotomy. What do we mean by modernisation? We know what the Leader of the House—along with many Labour Back Benchers, I suspect—means by it. He means getting away from here at 10 o'clock. I remind the hon. Gentleman that there is a balance to be struck between getting away from here at a reasonable time and discharging our duties as Members. That is why I referred to the dual role of a Member. It suits the Government increasingly to regard the role of Members on both sides of the House as being confined to looking after their constituency interests. Important as that is, the role of a Member is that of scrutiny and challenge. We must have ample opportunity, for example, to table amendments at the various stages of a Bill's consideration, and to speak to them if Mr. Speaker has been gracious enough to select them for debate. I am worried that so-called modernisation does not enhance that process. It does not strengthen the ability of Back Benchers to participate. Instead, it restricts it.

We are getting rid of the 45-minute debate following Second Reading, and there is concern about the way in which the guillotine will fall, when only outstanding Government amendments will be dealt with. Where does a Back Benchers on either side of the House go to express what may be a deeply held belief about important issues within the context of a Bill?

I return to what I have euphemistically described as the actions of the Maidstone Four. They felt obliged to attend a sitting of a Standing Committee in its concluding

minutes when the guillotine fell and large and important parts of the Bill concerning the police force had not been dealt with by the Committee.

Unless Back Benchers can see in our procedures a reasonable opportunity to table and speak to amendments on matters of importance and often of principle to them, the only alternative will be for more Members to take action such as that taken by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald or—I hope that this does not happen—action similar to that taken in earlier Parliaments by hon. Members on both sides of the House, who felt that the only way to demonstrate their frustration was to wave the Mace about. Let us not go down that route. That is not modernisation. Such action reflects the sheer frustration of Members at the fact that their will is being subsumed by a Government who are unwilling and ungenerous enough not to strengthen the rights of Back Benchers and instead curtail and usurp them through the deliberations of a Committee that is in the palm of government.

The Leader of the House ain't seen nothing yet if he thinks that what he saw in the previous Parliament will be acceptable in this Parliament, with badly drafted legislation being guillotined at every stage of its consideration as it passes through the House, and possibly in the upper Chamber, if that is what the Government plan to do. That is not modernisation by anybody's definition.

The motion is not about proper scrutiny. It is about getting away from the House by 10 o'clock. That is the benchmark that has been set. The Leader of the House touched on the matter briefly in his remarks last night, when he said:

"it does not seem entirely unreasonable that we should allow colleagues to go home at 10 o'clock at night. Members of any other profession would regard that as a very minimum working condition."—[*Official Report*, 27 June 2001; Vol. 370, c. 739.]

I remind the right hon. Gentleman of the very definition of "profession". People who regard their work in life as professional do not set deadlines for when they clock off. The definition of professional is seeing the job through until it is completed, and doing so in such a way that standards are upheld so as to ensure that the job is well done.

If the House and its proceedings are not to be professional in the definition to which I have referred and if we are to clock off before the job is finished or before it has been properly done, it is not only hon. Members but the country who will be the poorer. There are many hon. Members, including myself, who did not come to this place just to clock off. If that is what the Leader of the House means by modernisation, he should be only too well aware that future generations will spend a great deal of time trying to put right the legislation that the Labour Government, both in the previous Parliament and in this one, bequeathed to the nation, because it will be bad legislation. That will be the hallmark of what the right hon. Gentleman and the Labour Government pass on to future generations.

3.40 pm

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): The danger of our debate is that it provides a false choice for the House between programme motions—which undoubtedly will restrict time, one of the weapons of Parliament and the Opposition—and the status quo prior

to their introduction. The idea that earlier arrangements were a desirable or effective way of conducting business in the House is a dangerous fallacy to which those of us who are extremely worried about aspects of programme motions can easily fall prey.

As Sir Edward Heath, the former Prime Minister and Conservative leader, said in his final speech to the House before the election, Parliament's ability to hold the Government to account and scrutinise them has been getting weaker for a long time—about 50 years, he estimated. Unlike one of his predecessors, Winston Churchill, Sir Edward was never a great historian; in fact that weakness goes back to the Reform Act 1884 and the Parnell debates. Parnell obstructed the work of the House so much that both Front Benches got together and augmented the four Standing Orders that the House had with a great raft of further orders, on which every Government since have built. As has been said by many speakers in our preliminary debate on the business of the House and in this debate, all those changes to scrutiny in the House have had the effect of strengthening the Government and weakening Parliament's ability to hold them to account.

In seeking, quite properly and sensibly, more orderly debate, programme motions are strangling time—the one weapon left to the House. However, it is the weakest, crudest and least interesting weapon that we could possibly have, and my hon. Friends are right to say that the abuse of time does not help anybody at all; it does not help scrutiny or debate, does not help us to achieve better conclusions and is the most idiotic of weapons. However, it is the only one that Parliament has left. After 150 years, there are far too few weapons in the armoury of Parliament or the Opposition.

Mr. Cash: The hon. Gentleman made an interesting reference to a late 19th-century Session. He will of course recall that the former distinguished Clerk of the House, Sir Edward Fellowes, made the point that that autumn Session was devoted exclusively to transferring the rules and powers of the Speaker to the Executive—in effect, the Whips. In 1969, or whenever Sir Edward wrote his book, he said that, at that moment, the power of Back Benchers and Parliament was reduced. Parliament has not regained its strength since.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in the past 25 or 30 years, the situation has got progressively worse and that this is the time for Parliament to get it right? It would be a disorganised hypocrisy for the Leader of the House not to do so.

Mr. Fisher: I have considerable sympathy with the hon. Gentleman, who is right to link the problem to that period and to the essays and contributions to the history of the House of the former Clerk of the House, Sir Edward Fellowes.

We have got to find a third and better way—[Hon. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] I agree that programme motions could easily be abused by this Government or a future Government and could severely restrict the ability of the House to hold any Government to account. However, arrangements that we had in the recent past were no good either, and there will be no chance to improve scrutiny in the House unless we compensate Parliament and the

[Mr. Fisher]

Opposition for taking away time—which is used to hold to account and scrutinise the Government—and put other weapons in the armoury of Parliament.

Mr. Swayne: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that not only are we taking time from the Opposition via such motions but we are giving the Government a powerful time-management tool, which will be used most brutally when there is dissent from Labour Members? Debate is arranged so that a Government trustee will take up the available time to agree at length with the Government, to the exclusion of the dissenting voices of the hon. Gentleman's own colleagues?

Mr. Fisher: It is not yet clear whether the motions will improve the scrutiny that Parliament can apply to legislation. Nobody participating in our debate has addressed the valid point made by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House—that the crucial weapon is not time but the quality of argument. How do we provide Parliament and the Opposition—indeed, all Members of Parliament—with the opportunity to focus on the quality of argument before legislation is introduced, while it is being introduced and when it has been properly considered? We should consider how to get that quality instead of being seduced by the idea that spending a lot of time on legislation improves scrutiny, because it does not.

Mr. Forth: It is difficult to give any credence to the hon. Gentleman's case about the quality of argument when members of his Government, including those on the Front Bench and in the Modernisation Committee, introduced the device of deferred Divisions which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) pointed out, has divided and separated argument from voting. How can we give any credence to the assertion that the quality of argument will change hearts and minds and, perhaps, votes in the House, if someone who has never had a chance to hear the argument or—who knows?—even read it is expected to cast a vote in one of those peculiar deferred Divisions?

Mr. Fisher: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman on many aspects of this matter, but his obsessive, conspiratorial arguments against deferred Divisions rather miss the point. I take the point of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) that, in an ideal world, the vote follows the debate in quick succession, but the worry about deferred Divisions is much less significant than the one about a new set of programme motions that are not compensated for by other methods of improving the quality of scrutiny in the House.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman is making a serious contribution, which the House appreciates.

I shall make three quick suggestions. First, the Government should always introduce Bills a long time before Second Reading so that there is ample time for discussion by interested groups. Secondly, we should look again at the Special Standing Committee procedure, so that such Committees can take evidence from interested groups before a Bill goes into Committee. Thirdly, we should have much less legislation in every Session so that there is not so much time pressure.

Mr. Fisher: I am grateful for the right hon. and learned Gentleman's intervention, which is of the quality that

ought to be brought to this debate. The weakness of the case of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton and, indeed, of her memorandum—with whose spirit and critique I sympathise—is that they provide no alternative ways of improving the quality of scrutiny in the House. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has done the House a great service by suggesting some clear and simple ways in which scrutiny could be improved. We simply do not make enough of pre-legislative scrutiny; we do not engage in advance the skills and expertise of people who will be subject to our scrutiny. We ought always to have a standard for all important Bills and have a scrutiny stage prior to a Bill's Committee stage; those who understand the implications of the legislation should have an opportunity to engage with Members and say, "Look, the Bill will not work like that. It is well intentioned and we can see the thrust, but it will not work like that." As the right hon. and learned Gentleman said, better pre-legislative scrutiny has a role to play, but we also need to strengthen the structure of scrutiny, especially in Select Committees. That matter has been discussed already, and will be discussed again.

Mr. Shepherd: Quality of argument is related to time, and the amount of time available for debate is entirely in the hands of the Government. The Opposition's objections result from experience. The Bill that became the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001 has been mentioned. Liberal Democrat Members opposed every guillotine imposed on that Bill.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) spoke about rational alternative schemes. I would love to engage in a debate on such possibilities, but we have to address and vote on the motion before the House.

Mr. Fisher: I seldom disagree with the hon. Gentleman on matters to do with the House or the constitution, but I do not agree with what he has just said. I shall try to demonstrate that a useful contribution can be made in a short time. I shall sit down forthwith when I have made the points that I want to make.

I do not agree with the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) that the quality of an argument or debate depends on the time that is available for it. All hon. Members can speak much more concisely, briefly and in a way that holds the House's attention so that points can be made more quickly. I do not think that the quality of debate or scrutiny is reduced when contributions from Back-Bench Members are restricted to 10 minutes. On the contrary: such a time limit focuses minds.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fisher: Very briefly, as I wish to live by my own precepts.

Mr. Bercow: I understand the vantage point from which the hon. Gentleman approaches the matter, and his general principle is that the maximisation of time is not necessary for the effective scrutiny of legislation. However, does he accept that it is at least reasonable to observe that, when the Government insist on a programme

motion that represents something of a truncation of debate, it is not reasonable for them also to demonstrate that they have an insatiable appetite for amendments? It is common for several hundred Government amendments to be tabled towards the end of proceedings on a Bill, when less than a couple of minutes can be allowed for debate on each. Is that not wrong?

Mr. Fisher: I agree. Any legislation that goes through the House without debate or scrutiny is an insult to the public. It is extremely dangerous to pass ill-considered legislation.

However, Oppositions have often been guilty of hindering that scrutiny. The first Standing Committee to which I belonged was the one considering the Bill to privatise British Telecom. My colleague and friend Mr. John Golding told me how to operate in Standing Committee. We kept that Committee going for more than three months, thinking that we were doing a brave, noble and determined thing. It was an example of machismo politics, and it was quite understandable when the then Government guillotined the Bill after three months, saying, "This is ridiculous; enough is enough."

As a result of our tactics, most of the Bill was never discussed in the Standing Committee. With the benefit of 18 years of hindsight, I now think that our opposition—in which I believed totally at the time—was thoroughly misguided. British Telecom has probably performed better than when it was in public hands. However, parts of the Bill were never scrutinised. It is an insult to the public and the House when such important legislation can go through in that way.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I have one simple question for my hon. Friend. Had that Bill been guillotined in the way proposed today, is he certain that the elements that were not scrutinised would have been looked at? Would all the drafting have been improved? Would all the clauses have been debated? I have considerable reservations about that.

Mr. Fisher: I wonder whether my hon. Friend meant to say, "Had that Bill not been guillotined," because it was in fact guillotined. However, even if it had not been so guillotined, it is possible that we would not have made progress. We had got hardly one third of the way through what was a long and complicated Bill.

Mrs. Dunwoody: My question was based on that Bill being guillotined in the way that is proposed today.

Mr. Fisher: The Bill was not guillotined in the manner set out in the proposals before the House today, but it was ruthlessly guillotined. As I said, I now sympathise with that guillotine, and believe that the then Government were right to be impatient with the rather crude tactics employed by the then Opposition. We did not do justice to the Bill, and we did not allow the Standing Committee to do justice to an important piece of legislation. My point is that Oppositions can constrict debate as much as Governments.

The job of hon. Members of all parties is to improve the scrutiny of legislation and to hold the Government to account.

Lynne Jones: It has become clear to me in the time that I have been a Member of the House that the key to

better scrutiny of legislation is a more effective Committee stage. If the Government want to reduce the power of Back-Bench Members to waste time—and I agree with that aim—they should also be more willing to enhance scrutiny at the Committee stage. That might be achieved by appointing more independent people to the Committees. My own offers to serve in that way have often been turned down.

I agree that Special Standing Committees should be used more often, but only if they are allowed to come to some conclusion. They should be required to produce a report to the Government, containing recommendations about whether proposals in legislation will achieve what they are intended to achieve.

Mr. Fisher: My hon. Friend knows that I have much sympathy with what she has said, and that I acknowledge the independence with which she always speaks in the House.

I have detained the House long enough. The thrust of my remarks is clear, and it is that we are getting the balance wrong. I do not see how the motions before us will improve scrutiny, although they will make business and the House more orderly.

Mr. Grieve: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government cannot impose orderliness on the programming of Lords amendments? There will be no Programming Committee to deal with Lords amendments, for which the mechanism will be exactly the same as the old guillotine. Does not the hon. Gentleman agree that that must be the interpretation at which one arrives after a detailed reading of the motions' texts?

Mr. Fisher: I share the hon. Gentleman's worries in that regard, and I hope that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will clarify how Lords amendments will be handled. What is the point in having a second Chamber if we cannot consider the amendments that it sends to us?

However, the crucial question is whether the programme motions will improve scrutiny of legislation and Government business. I do not think that they will. There is nothing wrong with greater orderliness, but we are not getting right the balance between the responsibility of hon. Members of all parties to scrutinise legislation and the Government's absolute right to introduce the legislation that they want and to have it introduced according to the proper cycle.

I do not believe that the Government's right not to have their legislation obstructed means that the same legislation cannot be amended, but there is always a tension between those two possibilities. I do not think that the motions before us today improve the balance. I hope that we will return to these matters during this Parliament, as they lie at the heart of why hon. Members are here, and of what we do here.

3.58 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher), whose contribution lasted only 18 minutes yet was more thoughtful and provoked more sensible exchanges than what went before. I am grateful to him.

[Mr. Paul Tyler]

However, I draw the House's attention to the Modernisation Committee's first report of the 1997-98 Session. It contains an excellent chart that shows how the scrutiny of legislation can, under the existing Standing Orders, be undertaken in a number of different ways. If those options were taken up, there is no doubt that the legislation emerging from the House would be improved. The report contains some other suggestions for enhancing those different options.

The House faces some very important matters. The motions before us do not offer a panacea. The proposals do not amount to a magic wand that will do everything necessary to improve the way in which the House does its job. However, in a modest way and with good will, which has already been mentioned, they can make improvements.

Let us consider the context of the proposals and much of the discussion in the Chamber since the general election. The hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) said earlier that the fall in turnout should worry every Member of Parliament. I read an excellent Library briefing on turnout, and discovered that, when I was first elected in February 1974, the national turnout was 78.8 per cent. In my constituency, which was then called Bodmin, it was 83.3 per cent. This year, the national figure has dropped to 59.4 per cent., and even in the great constituency of North Cornwall, where we take politics seriously, it was down to 63.8 per cent. That is a 20 per cent. difference in a relatively short political lifetime. If the trend continues, it will be disastrous. In that context, this afternoon's debate is very important.

How do we rediscover Parliament's ability to demonstrate to the nation that it is the place where we conduct our business in an orderly manner? Scrutiny of Executive action is as important as that of legislation. In that respect, the Modernisation Committee's proposals have been successfully realised in Westminster Hall. A Minister has to attend proceedings and explain a specific part of the appropriate Department's responsibility. That is an important demonstration to the country of the way in which we do our job properly. The media have not picked that up, but that is another story for another occasion.

Mr. Hogg: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we are held in such low esteem partly because individual Members are not seen to be expressing their views, and are perceived as creatures of a party? That, perhaps more than any other factor, has done most to lower the House's standing.

Mr. Tyler: I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. He may recall that I once proposed a motion, which stated that the power of the party had increased, was increasing and should be diminished. It reflected the famous Dunning motion of the 1780s. However, I recall that the right hon. and learned Gentleman went into the opposing Lobby. All sinners repent eventually.

All parties have an important job to do in demonstrating that we approach the business of Parliament freely. That business has three purposes, and comprises scrutinising legislation, scrutinising Executive activity and representing

our constituents. All three aspects are important. We are dealing with only one this afternoon, and I must not be diverted into considering the others.

Mr. Salter: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that hon. Members who can scarcely be described as lickspittles have been present throughout the debate? They have occasionally expressed their views in defiance of their party. However, many choose not to do so at 2 am. What is wrong with that?

Mr. Tyler: I shall deal with that point later. The debate is the first opportunity for me to declare that I am no longer a member of the usual channels; I am no longer my party's Chief Whip. Our new Chief Whip has decreed that we have a free vote this afternoon. I am expressing my personal view as Liberal Democrat shadow Leader of the House, but I hope that my colleagues will follow my good example.

The new Leader of the House has had rave reviews in the media because it is clearly anticipated that he will be the House's man. I welcome that. However, I hope that the first, limited step that we are discussing will not also be the final step towards improving the conduct of the House's business. As other hon. Members have said, we look to the Leader of the House genuinely to lead us in trying to re-establish parliamentary control, not least over scrutiny and holding Ministers to account.

The Modernisation Committee, on which I was proud to serve, has produced several reports that are relevant to the motion. It is important to say up front that there is a genuine difference between quantity and quality. The quality of our work is not measured by the quantity of time that we spend on it. We must try to identify ways of improving the product without simply extending the hours. As the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central said, use of time is only one weapon. The weapons of effective argument and effective use of time should be our major consideration.

I plead with hon. Members who participate in the debate to read what must be the shortest report from any Select Committee. The report that the Modernisation Committee produced earlier this year is only one page, but it appears that not all hon. Members have read it. Again, I put it on record that the report's parentage is cross party, whatever the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) says. She may want to airbrush Sir Peter Emery, her former parliamentary neighbour, out of history, but he wrote the draft report. Neither the former Leader of the House nor I but Sir Peter Emery wrote it, and it was then discussed in the Committee.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), who voted for the report, is not present. I am also disappointed that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) is absent because he took an active and positive role in the earlier stages of the Modernisation Committee. None of those hon. Members complained about its chairmanship or said that the Leader of the House should not have chaired it. That spurious argument arrived on the scene with the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton at a late stage in the proceedings.

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman mentioned my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire

(Sir G. Young). I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not omit to mention that my right hon. Friend prepared a minority report on the Modernisation Committee's previous report, which originally introduced programming and deferred Divisions.

Mr. Tyler: That is true. However, it is also true that, in the report that we are currently considering, which has given rise to the motions—their details are the responsibility of the Leader of the House; they are nothing to do with the Committee or me—we took up the right hon. Gentleman's point. It states that the terms of trade between the Government and the Opposition need to be re-evaluated.

The Government of the day have an opportunity, a responsibility and a right to introduce legislation. If they have a mandate and retain a majority in the House, they have the opportunity to do that in reasonable time. Are the Conservative Opposition saying that the electoral system has gone wrong, and that because only some 40 per cent. of voters supported the new Government with their large majority, their legislative opportunities should be circumscribed? Are they saying that the fact that less than a quarter of the electorate voted for the Government means that they should be more humble? If so, that is new, and if they want to support us in introducing a fair voting system, we welcome all allies, even at this stage.

Let us assume for the moment that all hon. Members agree that a Government elected under our democratic, parliamentary system are entitled to introduce legislation while they command a majority in the House. The report also said that, within the time allocated for the legislation, it should be up to Opposition parties to make the running. They and Government Back-Bench Members should stipulate the priorities for consideration and votes. That will not happen if we revert to the blunt instrument of a guillotine, if that is not a contradiction. If there is a guillotine, the Government organise their business to prevent the Opposition and dissenting voices on the Government side from having their say and getting their vote.

The Transport Bill was a classic example. We had a programme motion, but, by agreement between the three main parties, and the full involvement of Government Back-Bench Members, we enabled the people who had genuine anxieties about the privatisation of National Air Traffic Services to have their say and their vote. If there had been a guillotine, the Government would have made sure that that did not occur. We therefore believe that, on an experimental basis—we always work on that basis—programme motions are more helpful to the conduct of good business in the House than guillotine motions. I know that in the past the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton has voted for a great many guillotine motions. She might be embarrassed by that. So far as I can recall, I have never voted for a guillotine motion, and neither have most of my colleagues. That is because we think that they just do not work. We vote for programme motions.

The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) is not here at the moment, but he made a rather misleading statement earlier about the Liberal Democrats which I must correct. We have voted against programme motions when they have immediately followed a Second Reading debate, because we felt that that was not the right context in which to discuss the matter. The right context in which to discuss the way in

which business is to be handled is a debate in Committee involving the people who are going to handle that business.

That is why the Select Committee proposals said, "Take it away from the Floor of the House, because it will not be discussed by the people who will then be responsible for the way in which the Bill is considered. Take it into Committee." In Committee, those who are going to participate in the discussion will have an input into the way in which the programme is designed, and the Chairman of the Standing Committee will seek to ensure fair play and that a balance is maintained between the different interests, including those of the Back Benchers—an important point made earlier by the hon. Member for Macclesfield.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman is making a perfectly sensible suggestion, but it would be even more sensible if we could devise a way of ensuring that the membership of the Standing Committee—which, under the hon. Gentleman's scheme, would be devising the timetable—were not so controlled by those on the Front Benches. The danger is that the Standing Committee will contain people who are broadly speaking, the creatures of those on the Front Benches.

Mr. Tyler: I very much agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. It is extremely important that those who have experience on the Front Benches get on to the Back Benches as fast as possible. The right hon. and learned Gentleman's redemption since he left the Government Front Bench is remarkable. I do not recall him raising these points at any stage when his Government were packing Committees on Bills and Select Committees in the 1992 to 1997 Parliament. However, he makes a perfectly valid point, which I endorse. Although it is not appropriate for this debate, the process by which people are put on to Committees—be they scrutiny Committees for Bills or other Committees—is an important issue to which I know the Leader of the House will want to return on a different occasion.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman accept, on the strength of the operation thus far of Programming Sub-Committees, that one of their enduring problems is that they seem to suffer from an identity crisis? They are what might politely—or less politely—be described as political cross-dressers or transvestites. On the one hand it is mooted that they are really a variation on the theme of a Standing Committee. If that is the case, why is there no verbatim transcript of the proceedings? Alternatively, it is suggested that they are Select Committees. In that case, what on earth is the business of the Government Whip in sitting on them?

Mr. Tyler: I bow to the hon. Gentleman's superior judgment. He obviously has direct experience of political cross-dressers whereas I have never encountered one, so I cannot speak on that with authority. However, he makes a serious point, which I take. I am sure that the Leader of the House and his deputy are listening carefully. There is mixed experience—let us put it no more strongly than that—of the operation of the Programming Sub-Committees. Some of my colleagues came back saying that they had worked remarkably well; some said

[Mr. Tyler]

that they had been led well by the Chair of the Committee; and some came back and said that, frankly, it was all sewn up in advance.

I say with great care as I look round the House, and now that I am no longer part of the usual channels, that I am amazed by the contributions of some previous members of the Government Whips Office—I am not looking at anyone in particular—earlier this afternoon. My experience of carve-ups between those on the two Front Benches was that they deliberately excluded the third party, and other minor parties, in the House, and often also excluded very carefully any consideration of the views of Government Back Benchers. That was true under successive Governments. If, by means of the proposals, programme motions will enable a less formal but more open dialogue to take place with those on the Back Benches in the Committees, that must be good for Parliament. I hope that that would restore some of the reputation to which other hon. Members have referred.

I am a great believer in evolution in this place. Having been in and out of it for some time, I am conscious that people outside think that we are far too staid in the way in which we conduct our business. They think that we get stuck in a rut and that we do not know what is going on in the world outside. The proposals that the Leader of the House has put before us represent a modest step, based on the solid support of a broad cross-section of members—not everyone; I accept the point made by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton—in the Modernisation Committee. The principle is right that those who are going to do the detailed scrutiny are the best people to decide how that scrutiny should be punctuated.

Mr. Grieve: I return to the point that I made earlier on Lords amendments, and I would be grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments on that. Nobody will determine the programming in that regard apart from the Leader of the House or the Minister in charge of the Bill in question. Does not that fly in the face of the intention that the hon. Gentleman says the Modernisation Committee had in coming up with these proposals?

Mr. Tyler: It is perfectly true that I do not recall a detailed discussion about Lords amendments. I shall look to the Minister to respond to that question when he replies. That is a perfectly fair point.

The choice before the House is this: do we want to revert to a situation in which an imposed guillotine is going to be used after appropriate amounts of waffle and hours of filibustering? It would not technically be filibustering, but we all know a near-filibuster when we see one. Is that the right way forward for the House? Alternatively, are we prepared, on some Bills at least—not on all of them; the Leader of the House has already given that assurance—to try to seek agreement in the Committee on the best way to programme the debate? I think that that is the better route.

I am extremely disappointed that the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills is not still here. Having said how important this debate was, it is disappointing that he has not stayed for it. Yet even he abstained on guillotine motions. I have here the proceedings of the Finance Bill

from February 1994. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton voted for the guillotine on that occasion, but even the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, who makes such a fetish of saying that we must never be forced to do anything we do not want to do, recognised that there was some merit in trying to make progress with the business of the House. It is better to have agreement across the Floor, and to have Back-Bench contributions, than to have everlasting guillotines.

I confess that I cannot get wildly excited either way on the subject of deferred Divisions, and I do not believe that the great British public can either. However, it is nonsense to say that this is breaking some terrible precedent or some great tradition. After all, we sometimes have a two-day debate on the remaining stages of a Bill or a delayed vote because amendments are grouped together. That can happen all too often.

However, what I really object to is the humbug of suggesting that 659 Members—or however many are permitted to vote—sit here throughout every debate and listen to every argument before they come to a conclusion. That day has long since gone, if it ever existed. Looking round the House now, I do not know how many Members are going to vote at 6.30 pm, but no one could say that they have all been sitting here listening to my words of wisdom and therefore know precisely what the issues are all about—and that that is why it is so critical that we have to ensure that they are all here. I am sorry to pick on the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, but he made this point very strongly on an earlier occasion. He is not here to listen to my arguments, so how can I persuade him? I fear he may go into the Opposition Lobby as well.

The proposals are not breaking precedents and I regard that as a dubious argument. They represent only a tiny step, and I hope that it is in the right direction.

I also hope that the House will be prepared at least to experiment, because that will mean that we can demonstrate to the world at large that we are taking our business more seriously. We are seeking to work in a more businesslike way and perhaps, in a small way, we might be able to reverse that disastrous turnout to which I referred earlier.

4.19 pm

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I welcome the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office to the Front Bench. I believe that this is his first debate. He has considerable expertise on constitutional issues and I am sure that he will be a valuable addition to our Front-Bench team.

I have to start by being slightly critical of the Modernisation Committee's report. I would have liked to see the kind of analysis of programme motions to which hon. Members referred earlier. Analysis of the arguments made in programme motion debates would have been valuable because it would have shown that no new arguments were made after the debate on the first such motion.

Every programme motion debate that I heard was remarkably similar. On several occasions, I made a point of coming to the Chamber to listen after 10 pm, and when I did not come to the Chamber, I often listened to the monitor in my room. The debates were remarkably unoriginal in content, so I am sorry that the Modernisation Committee did not think that it could undertake an

analysis. I did the next best thing. I could not undertake one myself, but I thought that reading the contributions of individual Members would be worth while.

A nice search facility is offered by *Hansard* online, so I typed in the name of a Member and the words that I was looking for. Instantly, and with little work, I found the number of references by a Member to a particular subject. I typed in "programme motion" and "Forth". I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is not in his place, as the total was 4,353. When I typed in "Hogg" and "programme motion", the total was 3,558, while "Bercow" gave a total of 3,401.

I was expecting to be asked how many references I had made. I typed in "Campbell" and must confess that the total was 5,833. However, I should point out that four other Members of the previous Parliament shared my name. I am afraid that *Hansard* online is not sufficiently discriminating to distinguish between Anne Campbell, Ronnie Campbell, Menzies Campbell and so on. My point is that programme motion debates were the sole preserve of a few Members who made the same points over and over and over again.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Lady is right that we were repetitious, but the problem is that once one accepts the precedent, it is difficult to protest. She is therefore correct that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and I took advantage of every debate to protest about what was going on so as not to let go and allow a precedent to be established for a procedure that we thought profoundly wrong.

Mrs. Campbell: I admire the right hon. and learned Gentleman's persistence. However, there comes a point in all democratic debate when one has to admit that the argument is lost. This is one such occasion. The point was made several times and the right hon. Gentleman lost in democratic votes, for good reasons.

I remind the House of the situation that persisted before the introduction of the programming and deferred votes experiment. Bills that were thought to be uncontroversial sailed through Second Reading and Committee only to be subjected to the tabling of huge numbers of amendments on Report and Third Reading. Those amendments often lacked substance, and were frequently trivial and obviously time-wasting, although they were, of course, in order. Many Opposition Members made essentially the same point.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Does not the hon. Lady detect in her tone some arrogance in her treatment of the House? She dismisses the opposition afforded from this side of the Chamber, but I put it to her that when she finds herself on these Benches, as she will one day, we shall throw those arguments back at her.

Mrs. Campbell: I have had the benefit of experience of the Opposition Benches, and I did not like it. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does not like it either. It is uncomfortable to feel that one is continually losing the argument, and I remember my delight when we won a vote in opposition. That was a remarkable feeling, although it becomes commonplace in government.

I do not believe that I am being arrogant, as many amendments were tabled for one purpose and one purpose only: to waste the House's time and to keep Labour

Members up until all hours of the day and night. We were frequently subjected to sitting until 2 or 3 am. Next day, Ministers and Members together felt deprived of sleep for no good purpose, as the debates changed nothing. After hours and hours of discussion, the Government did the obvious and imposed a guillotine, which was equally futile.

If Conservative Members think that the public admire or approve of such actions, I am afraid they are sadly mistaken. The general public do not approve; they think that we are all mad to sit here until 2 am or 3 am discussing arcane points about a comma in the middle of a clause. That is not a sensible way to use the time of busy people who have serious work to do, and it is one reason why many of the public, who are so disenchanted with the whole process, decided not to turn out to vote at the general election. The public find such activity totally abhorrent.

Mr. Howarth: There were infinitely more all-night sittings when I was elected to the House in 1983—night after night after night. My noble Friend Baroness Thatcher never complained, unlike the Prime Minister, who treats the House with complete contempt and comes here only once a week. My noble Friend would come to the House at 4.30 am completely unfazed, hair impeccably in place and handbag at the ready. She gave inspirational leadership to us all and never made any complaint.

I accept that there is no sense in time wasting and keeping Members up indefinitely for no good purpose, but I remind the hon. Lady that, when we were in government, there were no complaints from Ministers at the antics of the present Leader of the House and his colleagues.

Mrs. Campbell: The fact that the House sat later more frequently is no reason to say that it was better. When I sat on the Opposition Benches, I was aware that such activities were perpetrated by my party, although I never participated. I never even thought about whether I approved, although now that I sit on these Benches, I know that I definitely disapprove and that I would not like them to be pursued, even if I finish up on the Opposition Benches again.

Joan Ruddock: Can my hon. Friend clarify a point on which I hope she agrees with me? Those of us who are modernisers and who have campaigned for these changes are not trying to work fewer hours. We are trying to achieve circumstances in which we can work more effectively. We are all prepared to work horrendous hours, as we do now, but there must be a balance between the constituency, family life and our life in the House. As so many hon. Members have said, effective scrutiny can be achieved if we make changes and rearrange our hours and voting patterns.

Mrs. Campbell: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. All of us, as Members of Parliament, want more effective scrutiny in this place. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) made a similar point when he said that time was not in fact a very good weapon: we need to improve the quality and succinctness of our arguments, and make our points more

[Mrs. Campbell]

briefly and sharply and in a more focused way. Speeches that are to the point are much more likely to be noticed, and to engender interest outside.

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Campbell: I have given way a number of times, but I will do so once more.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I am sure that she speaks with great sincerity, and I accept her critique of some of our practices, but she will appreciate that—especially when measures are being introduced by a Government after a period during which that Government used the very tactics that she now deplores—the Opposition are bound to greet such measures with a certain suspicion. That is all the more inevitable given that on all the real measures that could be taken to modernise procedure in the House, we have heard nothing from the Leader of the House. The Conservative party has contributed by publishing a major document with proposals on the subject.

Mrs. Campbell: I am surprised that it has taken so long for an Opposition Member to refer to Lord Norton's report on modernisation, which was a welcome contribution to the debate. I am trying to set up an all-party modernisation group. I hope that Opposition Members will feel able to participate, and will use the opportunity to put Lord Norton's views to the group more cogently so that we can have a sensible discussion.

Debates could be much briefer and less repetitive than they are now. I am reminded of the famous writer—I think that it was Oscar Wilde, but I may be wrong—who said, "I am writing a long letter, as I do not have time to write a short one." That is the problem: because we do not prepare very well, we often have to go the long way round to say things that we could have said much more succinctly.

Mr. Tyler: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Campbell: I want to make some progress.

Mr. Tyler: A very small correction.

Mrs. Campbell: If it is a correction, I will give way.

Mr. Tyler: In fact, the quotation comes from Dr. Johnson rather than Oscar Wilde. That may appeal rather more to the Conservative ranks.

Mrs. Campbell: I thank the hon. Gentleman.

I also feel that debates held at a more reasonable time of day would attract more press interest. We have often engaged in debates at midnight or in the early hours of the morning, and it is unreasonable to expect any member of the press to be up at that time of night listening to what we say. I do not think that debates held after 10 pm are the most widely watched or noted.

I ask myself whether the general public admire parliamentarians who stay up late night after night, and I have to conclude that they do not: they just think we are

stupid to allow it to happen. Time and again, when I have raised the issue in the national media, constituents have asked me, "Why do you put up with it? We find it incredible that you are expected to be there night after night, for no good purpose."

It is important that we allow adequate time for debate. I do not approve of the practice of pushing clauses and Bills through this place when they have not been debated or scrutinised. But adequate time does not mean unlimited time because unlimited time has shown itself to invite abuse of the system.

Opposition Members mentioned the role of Members of Parliament. We must continually and carefully rethink that role. I regard myself as a representative of my constituency, and I think it important for me, in that role, to listen closely to what my constituents say to me. I read their letters and e-mails, talk to them whenever I can, and engage in dialogue, and I am frequently influenced by their remarks. I come back here, mention my experiences in debates, talk to Ministers and if I am persuaded myself, try to persuade other people.

It is important to the whole process of democracy for us all to give ourselves opportunities to be influenced by what constituents say. The problem is that some of us have the impression that a parliamentarian has a fixed set of ideas, comes here to express his or her views, and never undergoes any process of renewal—never goes back to listen to what the outside world is saying.

Elections are a good time at which to bring home the views of constituents. Many of us knock on doors in our constituencies during election campaigns, and at the end of the recent campaign I felt that I had a good idea of my constituents' concerns. That is an important process in which we should engage as often as we can, and that means having time to engage in it. If we are in this place all the time, the balance is wrong.

Mrs. Dunwoody: On a day when it has been announced that the House will probably rise on 19 July, does it not behove us to be careful about saying that we do not have enough time to talk to our constituents?

Mrs. Campbell: I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that 19 July is early. In recent years, the House has sat until the end of July. The early finish may be due to a number of factors, but it is certainly not due to the fact that the Executive want to give us time to go back to our constituencies. Listening to constituents, however, is an important part of our role.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Campbell: I am about to finish. I am sure that my hon. Friend will have an opportunity to make his own speech.

I hope that the House will vote for the proposals. I believe that both the quality of our lives and the quality of debate will be improved if we accept that programming will become a permanent feature of our procedures.

4.38 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell), who made some remarks with which I

agreed. Let me say this to the House more generally: I hope that Ministers will gather from the debate that there is a lot of genuine anxiety on both sides of the House about the way in which we conduct business.

The hon. Lady said that we had returned from the election with a clearer view of what the electorate felt about a number of issues. One message that I received—as, I think, did other Members—concerned the extent to which the House of Commons, politicians and politics are held in low regard. There are many reasons for that, and I do not think it necessary to catalogue them now; but for many years I have been aware of a recognition that the House has become the instrument of the Executive, and we as Members of Parliament have become the creatures of party. As a result, members of the public observing our deliberations say of Members that they are but expressing the party view.

I want to impress on hon. Members my profoundly held conviction—which, I should point out to the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), I held when I was on the Government Benches and serving in a Government office—that Members of Parliament should be much more independent. It is very nice to see my deputy Chief Whip on the Front Bench, because he knows my views as he has heard me express them many times. I took the precaution of including in my election address my belief that it is desirable for Members of Parliament to be as independent as possible. I wanted my constituents to know that when I come to the House it is my intention to be as independent as I feel is right.

I do not believe in the whipping system, and I do not like to be told that I have a free vote only on matters of conscience. I regard all votes as free. Clearly, there is a presumption that we vote in favour of our party, and we are obviously not experts on many issues. This has nothing to do with conscience. When individual Members of Parliament form an opinion, it behoves them to express that opinion and to vote according to it when desirable.

Mr. Cash: I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on that statement and on his election address. I made a similar point in my election address for exactly the same reason. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the greatest objective and justifiable change that any great party could make would be to have a policy of ensuring the independence of Parliament as well as the independence of Back Benchers?

Mr. Hogg: I agree with my hon. Friend. Modernisation is important, and there are things that we can do about our practices to make ourselves more efficient. To re-establish independence on both Benches is by far the most important thing that we can do. If we were to do that, and to speak our minds and vote accordingly, we would be held in much greater esteem, and the decisions of the House would have much greater authority.

Mr. Tyler: I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I told my electorate that I would agree with everything that my Chief Whip told me, but then I was the Chief Whip.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman's point is particularly valid for Select Committees and Committee work, but it is more difficult to be independent in the discussions that take place on the Floor of the House.

The fact that the centre of gravity has moved from the Chamber to the Committees—which some people regard as a retrograde step—may be an advantage in the context of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's argument.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman is right in part, but I would like to see as much independence as possible everywhere. It is obviously easier to be independent in the Committees, because hon. Members have access to much more information on the specific measures that they are discussing. I want hon. Members to be, broadly speaking, independent, and to form their own views on the basis of the evidence presented to them.

Incidentally, I would change the oath that we all take when we come to the House, not because I am an anti-monarchist—I am not—but because I want hon. Members to take an oath that they will vote in accordance with their judgment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is now straying rather wide of the mark.

Mr. Hogg: Only to this extent, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I may be able to persuade you of a slightly different view. If hon. Members swore that they would vote in accordance with their judgment, they would be in a much better position to say to the Whips, "Oh, no, my friend. I have sworn an oath, to which I intend to adhere." That would erect a different obligation, which one could set against the obligation of party. However, I do not want to test your patience further, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I am against the deferred Division procedure, and I have not the slightest intention of participating in any of the votes in the No Lobby for the remainder of this Parliament. We are allowing important decisions to be made by hon. Members signing a visitors' book, which they may sign as many as five or six days after the debate. I willingly concede that hon. Members frequently vote on matters without having heard the debate and without having been present at any material time, but the deferred Division procedure gives a legislative or parliamentary sanction to that process. I regard that as profoundly unsatisfactory. Although I did not entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) when she talked about third-party influence, the truth is that when hon. Members vote on a piece of paper six or seven days after the event they are much more prone to pressures from their Whips than they would be if they were present for the debate.

If hon. Members have to vote at the end of the business under discussion, there is a reasonable chance that they will listen to some part of the debate. They may identify some anxieties or problems that they wish to communicate to their Front-Bench colleagues or to the House, but the deferred voting procedure makes that impossible.

By using delegated legislation, Governments can make substantial changes to the law. If they must have hon. Members present—often late at night—to approve those changes, that is a check on the volume of legislation that they can handle in that way. The hon. Member for Cambridge understandably does not want to be here late night after night, and she would say to her Whips, "Look, my friends, this is intolerable." If enough of her

[Mr. Hogg]

hon. Friends said to their Whips, "This is intolerable", the volume of legislation passed in that way would not be as great as it would be if the Government could get it through by getting the visitors' book signed. There is no merit in the visitors' book, so I do not intend to sign it throughout the lifetime of this Parliament.

I am profoundly uneasy about programme motions. We need to consider the detail of the proposal for the programme motion, which has two substantive parts: paragraph A and paragraphs B and C. The key detail of paragraph A is that the motion is tabled before Second Reading and is to be voted on immediately after the conclusion of the Second Reading debate. It will be voted on, not debated, after Second Reading. Save for three limited exceptions, the programme motion will be taken forthwith.

The detail of the programme motion will be formulated before the Second Reading debate, which is before right hon. and hon. Members have had a chance to express their views on the merits of the Bill, or even those parts of the Bill that are deemed to be material. That is a travesty, because the Executive are determining the timetable without having listened to the views of hon. Members. We are precluded from saying that the timetable is inappropriate, because we cannot debate the timetable motion: it is to be voted on immediately after the Second Reading debate. That is a travesty of democracy.

Paragraphs B and C relate to the composition of the Programming Committee and Sub-Committee. The House will know that the Programming Committee comprises eight Members to be selected by the Speaker, with a quorum of four. The truth, as we know well, is that the members of the Committee and the Sub-Committee will be selected largely by the Whips. They will draw up the timetable that they wish to see. They will probably not consult the awkward squad on either side. Indeed, the awkward squad's interests will be disregarded. I do not suppose that the interests of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) or of my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) will be taken into account because the Front Bench will not want that to happen.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) said, the process also takes place in secret. There is no record of what happens in the Programming Committee. We do not know what pressures were brought to bear, who said what or how people voted. The process is put together by the Front Benches, whose interests are not mine nor are they those of my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), who is now a Back Bencher and whose interests should be with us. We have a legitimate interest in preserving the rights and powers of Parliament.

Mr. Shepherd: The rights and powers of the people.

Mr. Hogg: Indeed, my hon. Friend is right.

When we consider legislation, leaving aside the benefits and rights that flow from it, we are considering penalties and obligations. Legislation imposes burdens on the electorate, sometimes penal in character. In a democratic society, we all make an implied bargain to the effect that legislation will be properly scrutinised by the

representatives of the people. There is an implied bargain between members of a political community that legislation will not be imposed unless those representatives have had a chance to scrutinise it and express their views. The process that I have described, and which the Government are pursuing, is calculated to break down that bargain.

Inevitably, large chunks of legislation, some of it quite serious, will go through—some went through in the previous Parliament—without it having been discussed. When people begin to realise that their obligations are arising not as a result of scrutiny but as a result of fiat, directive and Executive action, they will come to realise that the days of the elected dictatorship have truly arrived. I am not trying to say that we are a dictatorship yet because I do not believe that that is true, but we are putting in place procedures that enable the Executive to ride roughshod over the liberties and freedoms of the people of this country and to ignore the considered opinions of their representatives. That is not just bad in the short term, but will undermine the foundations of democracy. I fear for the future.

4.52 pm

Ann McKechin (Glasgow, Maryhill): It is a great honour to make my maiden speech as the representative of the electorate of Glasgow, Maryhill. Although I was selected as a Labour candidate only in March this year, I received a warm welcome from the community. I heartily support my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House in the motions before us. Tradition has an important part to play in our institutions, but it should not act as a barrier to progress.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Maria Fyfe, who served the constituency diligently and with great skill over the past 14 years. Since arriving here, I have met many hon. Members who held her in high regard, and that sentiment was expressed to me by many of my constituents during my election campaign. She is an excellent example to follow. She was an independent and strong Back Bencher and I am sure that all hon. Members join me in wishing her well in her future endeavours. I feel privileged to stand here today as her successor and as part of a long line of Labour Members for Maryhill and, uniquely for Glasgow, as its second female Member of Parliament.

My constituency has yet again resoundingly shown its support for the Government with a 60 per cent. share of the vote and a majority almost double that achieved in the 1999 Scottish Parliament elections. Glasgow's citizens know that the Government are working for them on jobs, pensions or public services. When my predecessor was first elected, unemployment in Maryhill was growing at an alarming rate and was matched with chronic under-investment in public services and housing stock. The consequent dire effects on the local community were all too evident.

I am happy to say that the policies of the present Government, based firmly on the principle of social justice, have already had significant effect. In the past four years, long-term unemployment in Maryhill has been reduced by a massive 65 per cent. and the general unemployment figure has been lowered by almost 40 per cent.

However, there is still much to be done to lift our constituency from the poverty trap, and I urge the Government to continue their good work with a resolute

commitment to full employment and continued increases in our public spending. Too much talent and life has been squandered in the last quarter of a century. We have a heavy responsibility to our constituents, who have placed their trust in us year after year, to deliver them a country where opportunity for all is not just a meaningless phrase but a reality.

Maryhill has a strong record of community activism. That was particularly evident during my election campaign when the Forth and Clyde canal, part of which runs through the area, was formally reopened as part of the millennium project. Water has always been seen as a symbol of life, and that project encompasses many hopes and aspirations in the constituency for a better life in the coming years. Although Maryhill might not appear to be a tourist attraction, it may surprise hon. Members to know that it includes a bird sanctuary, the site of a Roman fort adjoining the Antonine wall, the Queen's Cross church designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the largest number of farms in any Glasgow constituency.

Maryhill is also home to Glasgow's best-loved football team—Partick Thistle, of course—which this year not only celebrated its 125th anniversary but succeeded in winning promotion to the first division. I am sure that this will be only the beginning of more triumphs for the club and I look forward to watching my first ever football match at its ground. Although I have not watched a match before, my active membership of the Labour party in the west of Scotland over the past decade has proved to be an invaluable source of information and advice.

There has rightly been great concern in the House about the low turnout at this and other recent elections. I urge hon. Members from all parts of the House to give serious and mature consideration to that issue in the weeks and months ahead. It is clear that a growing percentage of our electorate feel no link between themselves and their elected representatives. It is beholden on us to commit ourselves to reform and modernisation, where necessary, while retaining the highest standards of conduct. In particular, I welcome the Government's proposed legislation to allow political parties to achieve better gender balance as an important step in that process.

It is vital, however, that all sections of our society, including the media, play their part in establishing the principle that our Government are the servant of their citizens and that, in turn, all citizens have a duty to maintain our elected democracy. That sense of shared responsibility has, for multiple reasons, broken down in recent years. Unfortunately, spin and sleaze are not new phenomena in world history; they have been with us since the days of Machiavelli, if not before. But the right of ordinary citizens freely to elect their Governments is still a relatively recent concept, and one that has involved much struggle and sacrifice. Many people throughout this globe are still facing death and oppression and are fighting for rights that we take for granted at our peril. We must move away from the pre-eminence of individualism in our society, to create a society where the principle of caring for, and working with, our fellow citizens has priority.

It is not just within the confines of our own boundaries that threats to democracy exist. Elected Governments will face enormous challenges in the coming years, as we experience the effects of continued globalisation and changing relationships with international organisations. The economic and political strength of transnational corporations has been well documented, but as yet the

imbalance of power that they hold has still to be harnessed and regulated for the proper benefit of all people on the planet. If we are to avoid a return to a modern-day version of feudalism, democracies will need to unite to ensure that the interests of their citizens instead of the level of dividends paid to shareholders are made paramount.

I very much welcome the widespread reforms that were recently put in place by the Department for International Development, and its new priority on the reduction of world poverty. As someone who has long campaigned for the end of the link between trade and aid, I congratulate the Government on their proposed reforms of the aid system. The Government have established themselves as a world leader in the fight against the scourge of world poverty, but much still needs to be done, and I urge them to renew their efforts on debt reduction at the forthcoming Genoa summit, and to argue vigorously for reform of our international organisations to ensure that poverty reduction is truly integral to their decision-making processes.

Reform should be embraced, not feared. Let us tackle our challenges, be they at home or abroad, with renewed vigour and confidence to ensure that we have a democracy that is fit for this century.

5 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Ann McKechin) and to congratulate her on her maiden speech, which was delivered with assurance and fluency and which was very much in the tradition of the non-controversial maiden speech while nevertheless making some extremely punchy and proper points. I am sure that the House will look forward to hearing from her again, although she is likely to get the odd intervention in future, as she probably knows.

The hon. Lady spoke warmly of her predecessor, Maria Fyfe. We all remember Maria with considerable affection as a very individualistic parliamentarian. She was a real parliamentarian—she was frequently here and often intervened in debates. She was most certainly not a lackey of any Government—she spoke her mind, with confidence and authority. Her accent was slightly more Glaswegian than the hon. Lady's, so we did not always get every nuance. I am sure that we shall from the hon. Lady. Maria was a dear woman and an excellent Member of Parliament and we shall miss her. I am sure that we have a splendid replacement in the hon. Lady and I wish her many happy years here—with 60 per cent. of the poll it is going to take us more than a couple of elections to remove her. She will enjoy being here, I am sure.

The hon. Lady was right to interpret the rules governing maiden speeches by ranging widely, and you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, were right to let her do so. What is pertinent to this debate, however, is the fact that the hon. Lady was speaking as the Member of the Westminster Parliament—the United Kingdom Parliament—for Glasgow, Maryhill. In debates such as these, we all have to remember the words of the late Duncan Sandys who, when upbraided for not attending his constituency—not that it was difficult because it was only in Streatham, just down the road—said that he was the Member for Streatham in Westminster, not the Member for Westminster in Streatham.

[*Sir Patrick Cormack*]

We have to pay due regard to our constituencies and our constituents and the hon. Lady will almost certainly do so. I am sure that she will report back regularly, as we all do in our different ways.

I was saddened by the speech of the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) and I am sorry that she is not still in her place. She seemed to imply that we were here too much and in our constituencies too little. She was rightly interrupted by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), who reminded her that we have not only weekends but parliamentary recesses. That is when we do the bulk of our constituency work. Our prime duty is to be here when the House is in Session. I have always refused mid-week engagements in my constituency. I have returned there mid-week only for funerals, not for ordinary constituency engagements. It is my duty to be here.

One thing that has saddened me in the past few years, and which is relevant to this debate—it is not only the fault of this Government—has been the way in which the parliamentary week has been squeezed. There was a time when Thursday was one of the great parliamentary days. Until four years ago, we had Prime Minister's Question Time every Thursday as well as business questions. The House sat until 10 pm, when it nearly always voted. Thursday was an important parliamentary day.

An indicator of the way in which Thursday has ceased to be a great parliamentary day is the fact that even the Conservative party's 1922 committee now meets on Wednesdays, not Thursdays, because insufficient Members are here on that day. I do not suggest that all the blame is on one side of the House. The rot set in with Jopling. Many of us were too easily seduced by some of the Jopling proposals.

I will never forget a wonderful speech by the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), who told the House as he bared his soul a couple of years ago, how he had delayed the implementation of the Jopling proposals, which was very much in his gift as Opposition Chief Whip. He and the redoubtable Don Dixon delayed the proposals until they knew that they would be in government in a short time. They knew that the proposals would serve the Executive and the interests of government, and the right hon. Gentleman said so honestly in the House.

Of course, hon. Members can bare their souls and say all sorts of interesting things in debates such as this. I am bound to say that I savoured enormously the speech of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg). His was a wonderful bravura performance of the kind that we have come to expect of him on every occasion. I could not help but remember the days when he was a Government Whip instructing the 1922 committee on how we must vote—and if we deviated, by jove we would be in trouble.

I can also remember when, as a most distinguished Minister, my right hon. and learned Friend was not likely to brook deviation or any challenge—but of course, now that he is liberated on the Back Benches and in opposition, he is one of the foremost champions of parliamentary liberty. He has already said this afternoon that he will not cast his vote in a single deferred Division for the next four or five years, which will doubtless ensure that he can do one or two other things on Wednesdays.

This is a very serious debate, and I am bound to say that I welcome the tone of the speech made by the Leader of the House. I do not want to sound patronising, but the right hon. Gentleman has it within him to be a very considerable Leader of the House. When he was first elected, he immediately made his mark as someone who fitted in here and who relished the cut and thrust of parliamentary debate. He was a consummate debater, and some of the classic debates in the House in my time featured the right hon. Gentleman. He gave no quarter, but he was always punctilious, courteous and hard hitting, and I have missed him during the past four years. I make no criticism; of course, he had his particular brief and he did not attend debates very frequently because he was on Her Majesty's Government's business in other parts of the world.

The right hon. Gentleman could be a considerable Leader of the House, so long as he remembers that he has a dual role. Of course, he is a leading member of the Cabinet and of Her Majesty's Government, but he is also the leader and the servant of the House of Commons, and in that context, his role is second in importance only to that of Mr. Speaker or the occupant of the Chair. I hope that he will recognise that it is important that he gives back to the House more opportunities for the effective scrutiny of the Executive.

Legislation that is not properly scrutinised is frequently very bad, and we should all remind ourselves of that. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), I have never been a friend of the guillotine. I have voted against guillotines introduced by my party because it is wrong when great swathes of important legislation go undebated and undiscussed. We reached a parliamentary nadir just a few weeks before the general election, when we debated the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001 and the House connived at what I then called, and call again, a parliamentary lie—we deemed that things had been discussed that had not been discussed. That was a low point in parliamentary history, and I hope that it will never be repeated and that it will not have set a precedent. That happened as a direct consequence of programming legislation.

I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's assurance that he will not automatically programme all Bills. It is not the subject of programming that excites Opposition Members, but the manner in which it is done, so I hope that when programming is considered, there will be a proper opportunity adequately to discuss all the clauses of the Bill under consideration. That will mean that the Government cannot programme until after Second Reading. There must be proper opportunity for extending the time that is available. To take up the point made several times by my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) from the Opposition Front Bench, there must also be adequate discussion of amendments from the House of Lords. If that means that the Government have to produce less legislation for the House rather than more, so be it. That would be a good thing. If it means that the Government have to produce more draft Bills that we can crawl over before we come to debate them in their substantive form, again that will be a good thing. It is the quality, not the quantity, of legislation that matters.

There are many proposals in the Queen's Speech on which there will not be an ideological divide between the Government and the Opposition, but there will certainly

be a divide if things are rushed through without the opportunity adequately to consider and properly to debate. That also means the opportunity properly to consult with those legitimate outside interests whose fortunes will be affected by the legislation that we are passing. Far too often in the past four years, there has been inadequate time to discuss with our constituents and other interests what the Government have proposed.

The pre-election Session was rushed and there was almost no opportunity to discuss certain legislation. The Leader of the House will have to bear all these things carefully in mind if he is to earn the reputation of which he is certainly capable; if he is to go down in history as one of the considerable Leaders of the House. I remember many Leaders of the House, and two or three stand out as absolutely first class. One thinks of Norman St. John Stevas, who was responsible for introducing the Select Committees. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills anticipates me by mouthing the words "John Biffen", who was a marvellous Leader of the House because he was—I do not think that I am being unfair to anyone else—the least partisan. He was semi-detached before his semi-detachment was dispatched by the lady with the handbag. I sincerely hope that if the present Leader of the House becomes semi-detached he will not be dispatched. I hope that the Prime Minister will redeem his parliamentary reputation by realising that he has put the right man in the right place and leaving him there. This is a reputation that is at the moment potential, and we all want it to become actual.

Programming should not be entered into automatically. It is important that the Leader of the House heeds the words uttered this afternoon about the composition of Programming Committees and the way in which the time is allocated. If he does not, we may well have a repetition of events last year, and the reputation of Parliament will suffer in consequence. None of us, whether we come from Glasgow, Maryhill or from South Staffordshire, will benefit if the reputation of Parliament sinks. I want to see Parliament once more at the centre of national life, which at the moment it is not, and this Chamber at the centre of Parliament's life, which at the moment it is not.

The Leader of the House did not deal adequately with deferred Divisions—the postal ballot a week after the debate, when there has been no requirement to do anything and plenty of opportunity to be got at by all sorts of people. Deferred Divisions are a negation of what Parliament and parliamentary voting should be all about. I hope that, at the least, the right hon. Gentleman will discuss with his colleagues on the Modernisation Committee a reorganisation of deferred Divisions. As he reminded us, we are still in the experimental stage. Divisions should at least take place the day after the debate. It might be inconvenient for hon. Members to be here at 2 o'clock the next day to cast their votes, but we are not here for our convenience. It is our role to serve our constituents and to represent them adequately and properly. If that means the inconvenience of casting a deferred vote the day after a debate—at, for example, 9 o'clock in the morning or 2 o'clock in the afternoon—so be it.

I am no friend of long nights—I have been in the House too long for that. I remember Parliament sitting night after night in 1970 to debate the Industrial Relations Bill. There was a great spirit of camaraderie and I shall never forget the Labour Opposition bursting into song with a rendition

of the Red Flag at about 4 am. Nevertheless, the quality of legislation was not enhanced and the Industrial Relations Act 1971 had possibly the shortest life of any reforming legislation in the past 50 years. I do not want us to be here just for the sake of it, but it is our role to ensure that legislation is more than adequate.

As for the Modernisation Committee, I do not like its title and want it renamed. The "Improvement of Scrutiny Committee" would more adequately describe its proper function and role. I apologise to the Leader of the House if my intervention was a shade flippant, but he should think carefully about his role in relation to the Committee. He should consider whether it might be better for him to have someone like the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich or my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills as its Chairman. Its stature as a parliamentary Committee would grow immeasurably and its recommendations would carry far more weight. The right hon. Gentleman would continue to have an input; he would not be prevented from attending Committee meetings to put his point of view. However, the Leader of the House, a senior member of the Executive, should not be perceived as being in the driving seat of a body that is deciding how we will scrutinise every Government action. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will reflect carefully on that over the recess.

We are at the beginning of a new Parliament. The Conservative party did not have an especially successful election. That fell to the Labour party. Democrats must congratulate the winning party, but they must recognise, as the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill did in her maiden speech, the fact that we have to look to ourselves when we consider the percentage poll. Some 25 per cent. of those eligible to vote voted for the Government; 19 per cent. voted for us; and 11 per cent. voted for the Liberal Democrats. In that context, none of us has anything about which to be proud. One reason for that vote is the fact that the House has fallen in the estimation of the people. It lies within our power to enhance that reputation once again.

It is important that hon. Members, especially new Labour Members, remember that they have a crucial role. We cannot properly and fully hold the Executive to account unless they take part in that process. Everything that we do to reform and change our procedures should be with one aim in mind—to improve that scrutiny and involve everyone in it. If the Leader of the House can set us on that road, he will deserve the thanks of us all.

5.19 pm

Mr. Iain Luke (Dundee, East): It is with a great sense of honour and humility that I rise to make my maiden speech in this venerable Chamber. I am proud to have been elected by the constituents of Dundee, East to represent the city of my birth and their best interests in Westminster.

I believe that Dundee is Scotland's friendliest city. It certainly claims to be the United Kingdom's sunniest city, given its favourable location on the east coast and the shelter of the Sidlaw hills. It is one of Scotland's most densely packed urban centres, forming a regional centre for North Tayside, Angus and North-East Fife.

Dundee is unique in Scotland, if not in the UK, in that it can boast two premier league football teams within a stone's throw of each other on the same road. As well as

[Mr. Iain Luke]

that, there is an even political balance in football support in the city. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) is known in Dundee as an Arab, not because of his intense and knowledgeable interest in the middle east, for which I commend him, but because of the alleged practices in which his club used to participate: putting sand on the ground to make it more difficult for more skilful teams to play football in the winter. On the other hand, I am a dyed-in-the-wool true blue Dundee supporter. I hasten to add that not many supporters of either club will be casting their votes in the ballot in September for the leader of the Conservative party. Dundee is therefore a truly united city.

I am proud to represent a city which, over its long history—it celebrated its octocentenary in 1991—has never been frightened of change. One recurrent theme has been its ability to restructure and adapt itself to the circumstances with which it has been faced. Sited on the banks of the silvery Tay, which, as William McGonagall reflected, <b5>

"flows past Dundee once a day",

the city is one of the most beautiful estuarial settings. The beauty of its surroundings has, however, provided a picturesque backdrop to some tumultuous times.

In its long history, Dundee has been destroyed at least twice—once during the dynastic disputes between our two kingdoms in the 14th century, and again during the civil conflict between the Crown and Parliament in the 17th century. Neither, however, has posed an impediment to the growth of my home town, which continued at a great rate during the 19th century, when the city embraced technological and economic change, to become what was known as "Juteopolis"—the centre of the world's jute production. Links with the Indian sub-continent remain today. Dundee was a city of immense wealth and, indeed, of immense differences in income and opportunity. It was a truly radical city—outside Glasgow, perhaps at times the most radical in the UK.

Dundee provided a platform in the early 20th century for Winston Churchill, who was then part of the Liberal Government who introduced many progressive and impressive reforms, changing the social provision of this country for ever. Although Churchill lasted in the seat for 14 years, he was uniquely ousted by the only prohibitionist Christian Socialist Member of Parliament, Neddy Scrymgeour.

During my lifetime, changes in the city have been even greater. I and my generation have witnessed a massive transformation in the city's outlook, economy and physical environment. Gone are the days when the "standard fayre" was a pie, a pint and an onion bridie. We have moved to the Budweiser and bun served at Dundee contemporary arts centre, of which I am proud to be a director, which has transformed the city's outlook as a provider of culture and art. William Topaz McGonagall, whom we in Dundee would call a worthy, would certainly write a poem in the hilarious vein, which unfairly earned him the title of world's worst poet, chronicling his amazement at the changes that have been effected in the city in the 99 years since his death.

The city is currently building itself out of the 1960s city-centre planning blight that is so prevalent throughout the UK. It is not frightened of change. As a previous

two-time chair of the Dundee partnership and economic development and housing convenor of the city, I like to think that I have made some contribution to the process and helped Dundee to meet the demands of the 21st century.

Gone are the days when Dundee was known as the city of jute, jam and journalism. Now, we boast many leading-edge companies, such as NCR, Michelin, ABB Nitra and a host of smaller, research-based enterprises that are building on the biomedical expertise and computer-game technology of our city's two universities. I am proud of my city's progress and look forward to participating in that process and serving as its advocate here in Parliament.

The House and Dundee can rest assured that I shall do all I can to assist the civic process. I shall also do what I can to assist the modernisation of the House. I should like to pick up a theme that I have heard discussed in the past few weeks: the disengagement of electors from our political processes. Setting aside the television coverage, which tends to put people off anyway, I got the feeling while going around my constituency during the campaign that many people believe that it is the politicians who have distanced themselves from the electors.

Wherever we stand on modernisation, a vital role for the House is to re-engage with electors, especially young people. I have had the privilege of visiting schools and taking part in debates. I have seen the passion, commitment and great interest that many young people have. My Conservative opponent nearly got lynched in one school when he kept referring to the Scottish Executive as the "White Heather Club", but he certainly gave dimension to the debate and that should be continued.

I shall continue the campaign for modern practices pursued by my predecessor, John McAllion, to whom I pay tribute. I know that the Whips in the House will have heaved a collective sigh of relief now that John has moved to the Scottish Parliament, where he is technically under the control of Tom McCabe, the Labour business manager there. Throughout his time here, John advocated continual improvement in the lives and economic prosperity of his constituents, and I know that he will continue to do so in Holyrood. John and I and all the other elected representatives for Dundee will work as a team to put the case for our city. I am proud to have been elected to represent my home town and I shall do everything in my power to ensure that the best case is advanced for the city.

5.27 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): The speech by the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Mr. Luke) was a cheer to me. One of the very first cities to enter my consciousness was Dundee: I was born in Aberdeen and my mother comes from Glasgow, and our journeys between the two settled on Dundee, whose romance has never left me. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the great jute industry which, in a sense, opened up Scotland and brought the world to Scotland, so part of his history as a man of Dundee extends much further than the borders of Europe.

When the jute trade, which had created great wealth and prosperity, went into decline, Dundee shared the experience of many of our great cities. I give a cheer for what the hon. Gentleman had to say in that respect. I was especially moved by the fact that he believes in

representing the people of Dundee. I believe profoundly that the purpose of the House is to bring together people from all the parts of this island of ours to represent the people who live real lives—those who suffer the varying fortunes and prosperity of their town or region. I wish the hon. Gentleman well—his was a bonny and fair speech.

Before the House today are certain motions, and every speaker has touched on them—indeed, the hon. Member for Dundee, East did so as well. It is a cause of sorrow to me that we seem to be in a court in which the prosecution determines how long the defence may have to make its case. That was not always the tradition of the House. I should have liked the Leader of the House to be present for my speech, because I agree with much that was said by my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), who held forth the hopes for one of the most profound and forensic of cross-examiners of previous Governments, who could use procedures that were more open in those times to cause great difficulty to the Government.

I wonder what would happen if there were yet another Scott inquiry. I remember the formidable arguments that Sir Richard advanced to demonstrate the improprieties and the actions of people in high places. I was convinced that his arguments were right, and I along with one other Conservative Back Bencher supported the critique that Sir Richard Scott made of the actions taken by government. He said that certain Ministers had failed in their constitutional duty. I can think of no more severe rebuke. We are talking not of pennies that are stolen but of people who fail in their constitutional responsibilities.

In a sense, that is why I feel that the burdens of the arguments that have been advanced in response to the motions are a real failure in a constitutional sense. I would have liked to remind the Leader of the House that his job is as set out in the traditional sense by my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire. The right hon. Gentleman represents the House to the Executive. The formation of how we go about our businesses must allow the defence, if I may so categorise the other position, the opportunity to make its case—the Opposition's case. The motions arrogate power to the Executive—not the House as a collective of individual representatives, such as the hon. Member for Dundee, East and me, of defined areas in the country—and to the Government and the Crown.

A great Member retired at the end of the previous Parliament. He used to characterise the historic function of the House as a struggle against the powers of the Crown. In the course of our democratic history, however, the Crown moved from the end of the Mall to Downing street, and with that came the distinction that was lost. The Crown now so entirely controls the House that the opportunity for us to make a contrary case is diminished. The motions will enforce that.

There is no opportunity to make representations prior to the determination by the Government of what is the appropriate length of debate. Why is it that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), who led for the Opposition from the Front Bench, and all my other hon. Friends have so taken again these proposed measures? If I were taking Oakeshott as my guide, I would say, "I do not know where we are going sometimes. I can only guide myself by past experience."

The experience of the previous Parliament was lamentable. We ended up with no safety valve. There were no means by which we could say, "This was

insufficient." My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdicombe) and three other colleagues protested in a Committee Room. The Government insisted, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire said, that what was not true was true and that the House had considered a Bill when it had not.

I have spoken about justice lying in that cross-section of the detail of procedure. However, the justice that we are talking about concerns liberty, the liberty of the people whom we represent. There are those who argue that Parliament is in decline, and we know why that is. What difference do we make? If I want to do a deal, like Mr. Ecclestone, I deal direct with Government. None of those matters ever came before the House.

Our constituents are not foolish. We have no weight in the balance of things. Perhaps when there is a Major-type Government with a small majority, where persuasion can alter the conduct of individual Members who support that Government, that will make a difference. In these great days, however, there is fealty to party. That is not to denigrate the concept of party, because I do not doubt that every Member on the Government Benches supports the Labour party, and that those Members who sit round me support the Conservative party. But the control of patronage runs through the whole system.

The Leader of the House told us that the motions were built on reports produced by the House. With my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), I served on the Modernisation Committee. We consistently asked for a simple thing—an analysis of how the system had worked in practice. Rational people sat down and pursued rationally a Bill's individually weighted progress, allowing for differing tolerances, but that turned out so badly that the Liberal Democrat representative, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) who, if I may say so, had prattled on in Committee about the merits of the arrangements, saw his party vote against every single measure.

Mr. Tyler: Had the hon. Gentleman been in his usual place earlier, he would have heard me explain in detail why we objected to that motion and why we think that the present motion is an improvement. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman was not present, but perhaps he will at least give me credit for having explained that carefully. Since I was Chief Whip at the time, I was giving guidance to my colleagues; I was not accepting guidance from anybody else.

Mr. Shepherd: Building on experience, why should we suppose that the arrangements set out in the motion will be any different? We can only put our trust in the good will of the Leader of the House not to impose the guillotine—which, effectively, is what the arrangement amounts to—according to his or the Government's view, as opposed to that of other hon. Members. However, that runs contrary to everything that has happened.

The Leader of the House will not be aware that, during the four short years of the previous Parliament, when he was representing this country abroad, the Labour Government, of all Governments, imposed more guillotines than Mrs. Thatcher did in 11 years. That is

[Mr. Shepherd]

passed off as a simple thing, but I fought many of those guillotines because, as has been said, they involved our liberty, justice and relevance. That is all that I have to say on the issue.

I tabled an amendment to the motion which was not selected. However, I did so to try to shout to the House and those who are listening that, effectively, the motion gives the Executive the power to determine every jot and title of the business of the House and therefore strikes at our very function and at those whom we represent.

5.37 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): It is always a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) because he frequently expresses the views of the electorate in terms with which people identify.

Parliaments were created precisely to represent people's views, however they are expressed and wherever they come from. I am speaking today because Parliament matters as a representation of what the electorate think. Those who say that the recent election proved conclusively that people were turned off by voting and did not want to be involved are not confronting something that ought to be important to us. The electorate are concerned that their views, worries and upsets should be spoken about freely and simply in Parliament. If they do not believe that we are doing that job or, even worse, if they think that we are busy talking about our own interests, but not theirs, they no longer feel that their votes have an effect.

During the election, I spoke to many people who were concerned that the voting expected of them was no longer relevant to their lives. They did not feel that Her Majesty's Government and, in particular, Parliament reflected their real worries. Unlike the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell), they did not discuss with me the procedures of the House of Commons. It would be nice to think that many of my constituents in Crewe and Nantwich have an intimate understanding of the role of Select Committees and the decisions on which procedural motions have an effect but—brilliant though they all are—sadly, that is not the case. The reality is that people want hon. Members to raise their problems in the House in language with which they identify, which they understand and which represents them.

If the House organises its work in a way that appears to exclude the rights of Back Benchers in favour of the organised juggernaut of government, and appears to make it more difficult for people's worries to be communicated to those in charge, the electorate will become uneasy about the process of government. That process governs people's lives, and is not a matter of which party is in power. When we alter the House's procedures enough to take away some Back-Bench rights, we take away hon. Members' right to represent ordinary voters.

I have been in the House a long time, under Governments of all shapes, sizes and colours. They have all organised the programme of the House for their own convenience, to get what they wanted out of it. All Prime Ministers believe that they speak for God—although there is not much evidence for that—so I am not surprised that

they should want to get the measures that concern them on to the statute book. However, the tentacles of modern government reach much further, extending beyond the laws of the country to all those matters that impinge on people's lives every day but which are not discussed in the House.

I am worried not by the way in which legislation is examined or changed but by the continuing aim of speeding up its movement through Parliament. That removes the right of Back-Bench Members to give voice to what they are told by constituents.

We have been told that time is a weapon but that we should not use it. Often, however, time allows constituents to tell hon. Members what is wrong with legislative proposals. Time is the oil that makes legislation move forward at a speed that is acceptable to the electorate. If people no longer find our laws acceptable, they will begin to withdraw their support.

I am delighted to see my young friend the Parliamentary Secretary on the Front Bench. Perhaps it was cruel to land him, on his first appearance, with what I consider to be a negative proposal that will amount to a retrograde step. It is not new: it is the latest in a series of changes that are having a direct effect on the workings of the House. We have heard that the proposals are part of an experiment, and that they will not last, but when will the experiment end? I have heard a lot about timetabling, but nothing about the timetable for the experiment. Will the House of Commons have time to evaluate the experiment's effect?

When the electorate become uneasy about their lines of communication with the Government, and no longer think that their views are being represented as a whole, they will believe that alienation is their only answer. They will look for other means of expression outside Parliament, local government and the recognised norms of a democratic society. That is extremely dangerous.

It would be foolish to claim that the measure before us today, which is quite a small change, will automatically lead us down that path, but the thinking behind it could. That is the real worry: the feeling that the Executive must always have their way, that the Government must always get their legislation through whenever and by whatever means they want. That way lies perdition in a democratic society. Those who elect and send us here are varied and subject to many different pressures. If the gap between them and us, and between Parliament and what happens outside, becomes unbridgeable, there will be no need for timetables because our decisions will have no impact and be of no use. Ultimately, they will be of no worth to the electorate.

5.45 pm

Mr. David Cameron (Witney): I am pleased to follow the maiden speeches of the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Ann McKechin) and the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Mr. Luke). Both spoke movingly and amusingly about their constituencies. I am glad that the hon. Member for Dundee, East is a true blue in the sense that he supports Dundee. It is our role to turn him blue in other ways; I look forward to trying to do that.

I am delighted to make my maiden speech in a debate on our procedures. I have worked in two Departments—the Treasury and the Home Office—as a special adviser, and I was therefore one of the bad guys, always in a rush

to get legislation through the House in order to prove that the Executive were delivering their programme. However, experience shows that too many Bills are passed too quickly, often with too little scrutiny and to little concrete effect. I have therefore enjoyed listening to the debate on the Government's suggestion for improving matters. I remain sceptical about their solution.

I listened carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd). Both his speeches today were incredibly inspiring. As a new boy, I shall try to remember those lessons about our role and that of the House of Commons. The balance has tipped too far in favour of the Executive, and I am highly suspicious about programming Bills in advance and separating debates from votes.

I listened carefully to the comments of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) about being independent Members and listening to the arguments. I remember working with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) when he was Home Secretary. We lost many votes in the other place, and my right hon. and learned Friend asked our Minister there why we kept losing them. He replied, "Home Secretary, I am afraid that, although I get all our peers to come and vote, they listen to the arguments and they do not always go the right way."

It is a privilege and an honour to represent the constituency of Witney and the people of west Oxfordshire. Witney is a seat rich in history and blessed with some of England's most stunning towns, villages, buildings and countryside. It stretches from the market town of Chipping Norton in the north to the banks of the Thames in the south, and includes the thriving market towns of Witney, Carterton, Woodstock, Burford and Eynsham.

The western boundary is Oxfordshire's county boundary and includes Cotswold villages of great beauty such as Taynton and Idbury. To the east, the seat stretches towards Oxford's city limits, taking in Begbroke and Yarnton. There are 115 villages and settlements in valleys and plains watered by the Dorn, the Glyme, the Evenlode and the Windrush.

Burford was home to one of our great Speakers, William Lenthall, who stood up so clearly for the independence of the House and his office. West Oxfordshire can also boast of great statesmen. It contains the birth and burial places of Winston Churchill—Blenheim and Bladon.

We have great generals, such as John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, who was rewarded with Blenheim palace for his victories in the war of the Spanish succession. As we, on the Conservative Benches, settle our own issue of succession—Spanish or otherwise—I hope that our battles are shorter and slightly less bloody.

West Oxfordshire's political history extends to all traditions. The Levellers, who are now regarded as heroic early socialists, rebelled during the civil war because they believed that their leader, Cromwell, had betrayed the principles for which they fought. I am sure that Labour Members who might sometimes feel the same way do not need reminding that the leaders of that rebellion were rounded up and shot in Burford's churchyard. William Morris, the socialist visionary, lived and is buried at Kelmscott manor in my constituency, and I have no

hesitation in urging all hon. Members to visit that beautiful village on the banks of the Thames which time seems to have passed by.

Since 1945, west Oxfordshire has been represented by Sir Douglas Dodds-Parker, who parachuted into France in the 1940s; by Neil Marten, who served with the special forces during the war before embarking on a long and distinguished ministerial career; and by Douglas Hurd, now Lord Hurd, who was an outstanding Foreign Secretary. This brings me neatly to the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Woodward).

I know that it is traditional to pay tribute to one's immediate predecessor, and I have no hesitation in saying that I agreed with almost everything that he said in the first half of the previous Parliament, when he was a trenchant critic of the Government. It was only when he moved to the Labour Benches and supported that Government that our views started to diverge. I know that he worked hard for people in west Oxfordshire and must have felt strongly to leave such a magnificent constituency with such friendly and welcoming people. However, he remains a constituent, and a not insignificant local employer—not least in the area of domestic service. We are, in fact, quite close neighbours. On a clear day, from the hill behind my cottage, I can almost see some of the glittering spires of his great house.

West Oxfordshire's economy includes a wide diversity of agriculture and small and medium-sized businesses. Witney was for years dominated by blankets, beer and its railway. There remains just one blanket factory, the beer is predominantly brewed elsewhere and the railway has been closed. I will always support moves to examine reopening our railway to Oxford and extending the line to Carterton. Witney and west Oxfordshire are now beacons of enterprise and success. A range of service, technology and light industrial businesses have thrived in our area, and with the Arrows and Benetton Formula 1 teams, we are becoming the grand prix capital of the world. Our unemployment rate is close to the lowest in the country. However, our farming and tourism businesses have suffered badly from the foot and mouth outbreak and need time and an understanding, enabling Government to recover.

RAF Brize Norton, adjoining the relatively modern town of Carterton, is now one of our largest employers. It is one of Britain's longest-established air bases, and has played an important role in the defence of this country and in servicing our armed forces. Its facilities and expertise in air-to-air refuelling make it the perfect location for the future strategic tanker aircraft and I will always support its role. The now ageing VC10s that thunder down the runway loaded with fuel for our fighter aircraft are fondly known locally as "Prescotts", because they are able to refuel two Jaguars simultaneously—one under each wing. There was some suggestion during the election campaign that the right hon. Gentleman's name should be appended to some other type of aircraft, perhaps a fighter that packed a bit more of a punch.

Carterton is a rapidly growing town and in need of new services, such as a sixth form for its excellent community college, the campaign for which I strongly support. West Oxfordshire has an excellent Conservative-led district council, which has invested in those kinds of facilities, including some in Carterton, and I look forward to working with it in the years ahead.

[Mr. David Cameron]

Chipping Norton, long famous for William Bliss's tweed mill, which remains a striking landmark, is a classic Cotswold market town. It is also home to the kennels of the Heythrop hunt. There is a long tradition of hunting in west Oxfordshire, originally based in the royal forest of Wychwood, where Ethelred II established the first royal hunting lodge more than nine centuries ago. I will always stand up for the freedom of people in the countryside to take part in country sports, and, in the light of today's debate, would always be concerned about any limits set on a debate on a hunting Bill that could curtail that freedom.

Under its beautiful and serene exterior, west Oxfordshire faces important issues and problems. Rural poverty has been exacerbated by foot and mouth. The decline of local services, emphasised by the tragic closure of Burford hospital during the last Parliament, has angered local people. We still have cottage hospitals in Witney and Chipping Norton, which I strongly support.

Rumours of budget cuts for our hospitals and the dreaded "r" word—rationalisation—for our ambulance service are rife. Those emergency services and hospitals play a vital rôle in rural communities and they should be expanded, not discarded. In the context of today's debate, the health reform bill promises decentralisation, but we shall need a lot of time to scrutinise it and ensure that it really will deliver a local NHS. I hope that that can happen under the proposed system.

In Witney, there is huge pressure on housing and great concern that the Government's top-down housing targets will mean building on greenfield sites and wrecking the countryside that we love. That is another issue of great local importance.

The theme of how we make and scrutinise decisions runs through today's debate. I wanted to be elected to the House because I believe in what it stands for and what it can do to hold Governments to account, air grievances and raise issues that people in west Oxfordshire care about. I also wanted to be elected because, through action here, one can get things done.

I shall support all the efforts being made to restore the House as the cockpit of debate, and the place where policies are announced, debated and decided and where the Government are scrutinised and challenged, whether on the Floor of the Chamber or through strengthened, independent Select Committees. I cannot see how deciding in advance how much time should be given to a Bill and systematic guillotining can help in that regard, but I am a new boy and I am listening to the arguments.

The beauties of west Oxfordshire of which I have spoken—the glorious view from the top of Burford high street and Pope's tower in Stanton Harcourt—sum up for many people what they feel about their British identity. I know that we shall always be able to treasure that identity, whether it rests on those feelings or on something else, but what matters just as much as our identity is our self-determination, and our ability to make decisions as a nation and to question and challenge them properly in this place. The ability to continue doing so rests in our own hands. It is a privilege that I shall try to preserve while serving the kind and generous people of west Oxfordshire.

5.57 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): It is rare for an hon. Member to have the privilege of following such an outstanding maiden speech. I congratulate my friend and hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) on a superb speech that provided a fascinating and witty discourse on the qualities of the Witney constituency, which we have not heard so eloquently expressed previously.

I am bound to say, and as my hon. Friend may know, I regard him as a wonderful replacement for his predecessor, and I have no hesitation in saying that. He not only kept to the conventions of the House in his witty description of the circumstances of his arrival in Witney, but made extremely apposite points about the debate. We look forward with great pleasure to hearing more of him in the House, because he is a splendid addition to our Conservative ranks. In him, I see a conviction politician who will fight for the interests of his constituents and of our party and Parliament.

I have only two minutes in which to address the House on these important matters, so, having had the pleasure of entertaining hon. Members at rather greater length in the previous Parliament, I shall be brief. I oppose what the Government propose, because the debate, like the discussion on the programme motion, has shown the contempt in which the Government hold Parliament.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) described deferred Divisions as the visitors' book. It may be signed at 3.30 pm on Wednesdays, immediately after Prime Minister's questions, which has been moved from Tuesdays and Thursdays. There is minimum inconvenience for hon. Members, and right hon. Members in particular, who can sign the visitors' book at 3.30 pm. The introduction of that visitors' book is greatly to the disadvantage of the House and our procedures and, like my right hon. and learned Friend, I shall not sign it throughout this Parliament, because it is an affront.

As for the programming motion, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) mentioned how many times the present Government, in comparison with the previous one, had tabled guillotine motions. Moreover, the time allowed for debates on such motions has been reduced from three hours to 45 minutes, and then to no time at all, with the Question being put forthwith. That demonstrates the contempt in which the House has been held by this Government—this Labour party.

We should not see this development in isolation, for the Leader of the other place has made clear his plans for extensive changes there as well. We are witnessing an assault not just on the procedures of the House of Commons but on those of the other place, where it is proposed—not yet formally proposed, but the idea has been floated—that there be no votes during Committee stages.

It is to the great credit of the upper House that it has engaged in some of the more extensive debates on important issues that are of concern to our constituents, and that matters have been subjected to greater scrutiny there than has been possible here. The measure introduced today does the Government no credit whatever.

6.1 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): This has been a good debate. It struck me as much more measured than the debate in which we first discussed the question of motions of this type, and perhaps rather sombre in tone. I shall return to that in a moment.

One reason why this debate has been more good-humoured than the last may be the maiden speeches that we have heard this afternoon. I especially enjoyed those of the hon. Members for Glasgow, Maryhill (Ann McKechin) and for Dundee, East (Mr. Luke), and, of course, of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron), whose constituency I know well. He succeeded in depicting it in short words but with a great deal of feeling.

All those new Members are welcome. It is, perhaps, especially apposite that they should have made maiden speeches this afternoon when we are debating issues that touch our future, our existence and our relevance. For what concerns us today is not just the programming motion in itself: as has been said, it is linked with the overall direction in which the House is going.

Hon. Members speak of modernisation and the need for it. I am second to none in saying that there are numerous areas in which the practices of the House, and its efficiency, could do with review; but the key issue for us to consider is whether we are going down the right path in carrying out that task, or whether we are simply passing an ad hoc measure whose purpose seems largely to be to suit the needs of the Executive rather than those of the House.

I hope this is not an omen, but one thing about the Labour speakers today struck me as noteworthy. Let me for the moment leave aside the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell), who made an interesting speech with much of which I had little difficulty in agreeing. As far as I could see, not one Labour member of the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons—apart from the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike), who contributed briefly to the earlier debate on the guillotine motion—spoke today, although the Committee's recommendation is being presented to the House. Yet this is supposed to be a debate initiated by the House itself.

My impression is that Labour Members who have made valuable contributions today have been very guarded in their reception of the proposals. I shall say more about those contributions shortly. No one expressed great enthusiasm except the hon. Member for Cambridge, and even she had some reservations. We saw a succession of critics on both sides of the House, the only two enthusiasts being the Leader of the House and the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), who was a member of the Committee. I am sorry that he is not present now.

I do not want to spend too much time on deferred votes. I agree with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher), who rightly said that it was the lesser of the two issues that we are considering. I regret the fact that we brought the deferred votes procedure into operation, because it shows that the House is approaching its problems wrongly. It may be inconvenient to vote after 10 pm, and that may be a reflection of bad programming. However, rather than addressing how we could better programme or modernise our procedures so as to

minimise such votes, we have committed and will continue to commit the great error of separating vote from debate.

There may not be many hon. Members present in the Chamber during debates, but at least there is a centrality to those activities, which is maintained when votes follow debates. The previous exceptions to the rule that we vote after debates were few. It has now been turned into a rubber-stamping exercise carried out on a Wednesday afternoon, and it is difficult to escape the conclusion that for some people it is a relatively painless way of improving their voting record.

If we lose the centrality of the Chamber and its activities, we will lose something precious. We are not social workers in our constituencies—that may be a role that we have taken on, but it was not the role that we were elected to undertake. Our role is in the process of debate in Parliament, and even the gossip in the Tea Room is important in that exchange of political views because it brings us together. If we compartmentalise ourselves—as the deferred voting process tends to do—we do ourselves and the country a great disservice. I hope that we will revisit deferred voting, and that when we do, we will have the courage to tackle the problem that it was designed to address in a different way.

The proposal on programme motions goes much further than the system that we had last year. I was particularly struck by the contributions of the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent, Central and for Cambridge, who acknowledged that much more needed to be done than merely tinkering with programme motions. I shall not run through a list of all my hon. Friends who made telling contributions, but my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), who is a great exponent of our parliamentary tradition, should be listened to with care when he says that we are paddling ourselves into irrelevance and oblivion. That is how this will be perceived.

It is all very well having programme motions. I welcome them, and I have sat on Standing Committees that have been subject to programme motions. I acknowledge to the Leader of the House that if the system of Programming Sub-Committees that he is establishing works, it could be a great improvement. However, I am bound to flag up my anxieties.

First, the secrecy surrounding the process is all very well, but how can we learn from it if we are denied access to the Sub-Committees' operations and deliberations? After all, most parliamentarians learn from their mistakes, as do most people in their daily lives, yet those excluded from a Sub-Committee's deliberations will have no idea whether it got it right or not, except anecdotally. It is scandalous that we are setting up such a structure with no transparency.

Whole areas will be of no concern to the Committees and their Programming Sub-Committees, because much of this programming business relates to matters dealt with after the business has returned to the Floor of the House or when it comes back from the other place. In the last Parliament, the Government extensively used the House of Lords to rewrite and amend legislation. I see Labour Members shaking their heads. I sat on the Committee that considered the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. That Bill commanded support from both sides of the House and was acknowledged when it

[*Mr. Dominic Grieve*]

left Committee to be in a woefully defective state. The Government, perfectly properly, amended it in the House of Lords. However, although that Bill was all the more the responsibility of the House since it concerned the electoral process, we had virtually no opportunity to consider it in detail when it returned to this place.

The guillotine that was imposed then was identical to what we will have if we pass the programming motion under consideration. I cannot see the difference. In both cases a ministerial decision determines how long should be allowed for debate and the programming takes place accordingly. There is no indication as to whether there will be an opportunity for input or consultation of any kind. I fail to understand how that can be an improvement on the existing system or how it will be to the House's credit. During today's debate, one hon. Member after another has highlighted the central point that it is wrong to pass legislation that has not been scrutinised.

We have heard a great deal about filibustering and about hon. Members who hold up proceedings. We have to face the fact that with hundreds of Members of Parliament and, thank goodness, with some who will not slavishly follow the Whips, there will be people with bees in their bonnets. Some of them may be unreasonable, as may be those who have lobbied them, but they are entitled to a hearing if this place is to have any relevance.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central rightly pointed out that from about 1866 onwards power started to ebb away from this place to the Executive. It is at least worth remembering that in the 19th century considerable tolerance was accorded to windbag Members of Parliament who droned into the night about their pet subjects. Ultimately, that was a matter of forbearance by the Executive, whom the Leader of the House represents just as I hope that he will represent our interests across the Chamber. That forbearance was based on the principle that it was necessary to have exhaustive discussion because if we do not, as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) so rightly said, people may start to resort to extra-parliamentary methods to achieve their ends.

We should remember what happened as recently as last autumn when large numbers of people took part in a protest that paralysed this country and brought about a change in the Government's taxation policy. It may be thought that that was to the advantage of my party, but it frightened me. It seemed to be a classic example of a breakdown of parliamentary democracy. I speak as someone with a half-French background; there, I am afraid that the notions of parliamentary democracy are not well developed. In that country, such action is an institutionalised phenomenon and is seen as the only way to bring home to the Executive and the elite who govern the country the people's dissatisfaction at the way in which the country is being run. Mercifully, we have been free of that, but when I look at what is being proposed today, I am left with the feeling that this is another nail in the coffin.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will my hon. Friend summarise his views before finishing? It is important to know what the Opposition Front Bench would do in office. Does he agree that the Government have a right to get their Bills through and to do so in a

reasonable time but that the Opposition also have a right to determine what subjects should be debated within that time? If there were to be a Conservative Government, would he ensure that there were discussions through the usual channels before any vote on a programming motion and that there would be such a vote only if discussions broke down?

Mr. Grieve: My hon. Friend makes powerful and compelling points, but I would go further, in this sense.

Many have congratulated the Leader of the House on his appearance at the Dispatch Box, and I do, too. He has an opportunity, but the question is, will it be taken? If indeed the Government wish to bring forward proposals, along the lines of those of the Norton committee, for substantial reform of how Parliament can hold the Executive to account, he will have support, and if things such as the programme motion before us were part of those proposals, it would be much easier to be reassured about the Government's intentions. But at the moment, every time that modernisation comes along, it is simply another nail in the coffin of the few remaining—doubtless sometimes abused and tawdry—powers left to Back Benchers to make a noise about something. I tell the Leader of the House that if this is the best that we are going to get, we shall be in a sad and sorry place by the end of this Parliament.

For myself, I will vote against these motions. I believe that they are wrong. The only circumstances in which I could support them would be if they were part of a total package that had been brought about by co-operation. The willingness to co-operate exists, but the will on the Government side appears wholly absent.

6.16 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Stephen Twigg): I start on a positive note. I welcome at least the first part of the concluding remarks made by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) and sincerely hope that, with a new Parliament, we can develop the good will that he mentioned. I would much prefer that the process of debate and consideration of the reform and modernisation of the House had full cross-party support, and that Members from the main Opposition party did not feel, as they have today, unable to support the proposals.

We have had an interesting debate, in which Members have spoken from a range of perspectives. It is the first debate in this Parliament on the modernisation of the House of Commons. Let me quote something that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said last night in his winding-up speech on the debate on the Loyal Address, because I believe that it responds to some of the points that have been made tonight by Members on both sides of the House. He said that two important purposes of modernisation were, first,

"to enable the House to hold the Government to account and to scrutinise their Executive decisions and legislation . . . good scrutiny makes for good government . . . The second objective of modernisation must be to ensure that the hours and working methods of this House belong to the same century in which most of our constituents live and work."—[*Official Report*, 27 June 2001; Vol. 370, c. 738.]

Very often, these debates create the impression that those two purposes are alternatives—opposites. I see no reason why we should have to choose between them. I see no reason why we should not seek to achieve both.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield mentioned the Norton commission and the Hansard Society, both of which have made positive contributions to this debate and both of which, in their different ways, seek to meet both criteria set out by my right hon. Friend last night.

I thank all Members who participated in the debate. I apologise if I cannot respond to all the points made, but I undertake to write to any hon. Member whose points I do not address. I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for Beaconsfield about the three excellent maiden speeches that we have heard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Ann McKechin) made a powerful and confident speech. I pay tribute to the work that she did before entering the House on issues of international development and fighting world poverty. I was interested to hear that Glasgow, Maryhill is a farming constituency and to hear of her ardent support—new-found ardent support—for Partick Thistle.

I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, East (Mr. Luke) because I missed the opening of his speech, but he made a strong commitment, as did his predecessor in the House, to the modernisation of the House and its practices, and I pay tribute to that.

The hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) made a very witty, powerful contribution to the debate. I am sure that he was pleased to bring to an end the brief period in which Witney was represented by the Labour party, although when he started to talk about the Levellers I wondered whether he might be planning to follow his predecessor and cross the Floor. I suspect that that might not happen. I congratulate all three maiden speakers.

Today's debate has focused mostly on programming, but I was struck by the fact that two Conservative Members said that they had never participated in a deferred Division and intended never to sign what they termed the visitors' book. I was worried that if that became a trend throughout the Conservative party, Labour's already large majority would become larger still. In the interests of democracy, I encourage other Conservative Members to participate in deferred Divisions.

We heard some pretty synthetic anger about the use of deferred Divisions. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) seemed to be concerned that our constituents might discover the timing of a vote and lobby us about how we should vote. I do not imagine that any of us would have a problem with that. If a deferred Division is on a matter that gives rise to strength of opinion in a constituency, surely it is part of the proper democratic process that people can participate.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) suggested that deferring Divisions meant that Members would be less informed when participating in votes. If anything, a deferred Division enables a Member to be more informed. A Member who was not present for the debate has the time to study *Hansard*. It is not reasonable to suggest, therefore, that people who do not participate in debates are any less well informed than those who vote in the traditional way at the end of a debate.

The motion gives more rights to Standing Committees, as was grudgingly acknowledged by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield, when he said that it could be a great improvement. That will be the test in the coming year as we experiment with the proposal. The Government will still table a programme motion on Second Reading, to set

an out date from Committee and the overall allocation of time for remaining stages. The motion will, for the first time, give the Standing Committee power to make its own proposals to amend either the out date or the allocation of time for remaining stages. Moreover, the motion obliges the Government to table a motion to give effect to the Standing Committee's proposals, which will be taken forthwith, or, if the proposals are rejected, to have a debate on the Floor of the House. If the proposal is that there should be more time in Standing Committee, the motion cannot be delayed and must be tabled within five sitting days.

That will enable the Standing Committee and the House to vary an out date and the time for remaining stages in the light of the Committee's sittings. It gives the initiative to the Standing Committee, as the Modernisation Committee concluded that its members are best placed to undertake programming. We have looked at the experience of the previous Session and have tried to learn from it. That is what the Modernisation Committee report seeks to do and the proposals tonight would implement that.

I shall attempt, albeit briefly, to respond to some of the other contributions. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton quoted a letter from the previous Leader of the House and was concerned that programming does not ensure that all parts of the Bill are scrutinised. Clearly, one of the major purposes of programming is to ensure that that scrutiny happens through all the stages of the Bill. The letter received from my right hon. Friend is evidence of her good faith. She stressed the powers that Opposition parties should have through the process and she tried to review how it was working in practice.

If the Opposition do not engage with the process, there is little that can be done. That is why the Modernisation Committee has reviewed the proposals to create greater flexibility. If there is good will and hon. Members on both sides of the House participate, we may be able to have more effective scrutiny as a result of the changes.

Mrs. Browning: Notwithstanding our principled objection to the proposals, once they were agreed there was no question of our not participating in the Programming Sub-Committees; we did participate. The right hon. Lady wrote the letter because Ministers were not complying as she had expected them to.

Mr. Twigg: It is clearly incumbent on all hon. Members, including Ministers, to comply with the letter and the spirit of the changes. That is important because they are as much about the culture as about the rules of the House and any Sessional Order with which we deal.

I shall move on to try to address some of the other points made by right hon. and hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) said that, although programming was acceptable, compensating changes should be made. As I have said, the aim of programming is not to reduce scrutiny. My hon. Friend made some important points about pre-legislative scrutiny, but the changes should not be seen in isolation. Pre-legislative scrutiny has already taken place, and we have the opportunity to extend it with the legislation that will be introduced in this Parliament. Hon. Members should view the changes as a package, rather than simply considering each of them in isolation. I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to consider far more pre-legislative scrutiny.

[Mr. Twigg]

The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), who served as a member of the Modernisation Committee throughout the previous Parliament, made a point, as he did in a previous debate, about the number of guillotine motions during the previous Parliament compared to the period when Baroness Thatcher was Prime Minister. I understand that he arrived at his figure for the number of Bills guillotined by adding guillotine motions to programme motions. I entirely respect the fact that he does not agree with programming; that is the point of this debate, but programming has wide support in the House. If guillotines are considered separately from programme motions, the hon. Gentleman will find that his point does not arise.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made a point about the Programming Sub-Committees not meeting in public and the lack of available transcripts. I understand that all the formal proceedings of the Committees are minuted, but that it is not the practice to publish the minutes. That is the point that the hon. Gentleman makes, but it is not a decision for the Government. The Sub-Committees are constituted as Select Committees. They are deliberative Committees, and Mr. Speaker has ruled that they sit in private. That has advantages, because a more consensual approach can be established to ensure that the concerns of Opposition and Government Members, as well as those of Front Benchers, are included, but such issues can be reviewed and are open for debate as the process of modernisation and reform of the House continues.

The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), to whom I apologise because I was not in the Chamber to hear all his speech, made an important contribution. He made the suggestion, among others, that the Modernisation Committee could be reconstituted as an "Improvement of Scrutiny Committee". Clearly, that is one of the many suggestions that can be considered as matters progress. Of course, the Procedure Committee and the Liaison Committee, both of which are chaired by Back Benchers, serve as powerful advocates for change and improvement in the practices of the House. The most positive way forward is to achieve the best possible co-operation between those Committees and the Modernisation Committee during this Parliament.

If hon. Members will excuse me, I shall draw my speech to a close by referring more generally to the background to the debate. Several Members have referred to the role of Members of Parliament. Sometimes the impression given is that Labour Members are super social workers and that Opposition Members simply want to scrutinise legislation. That suggestion is deeply unfair; all hon. Members seek to do our best not only in representing our constituents but in scrutinising legislation and the Government.

The proposals are experimental and are based on a review of how the previous proposals worked in the previous Session. If they do not work, we can review and reconsider them in a year's time. As has been said, there was support from all parties in the Modernisation Committee. The former Member for East Devon, Sir Peter Emery, supported the proposals, as did Labour and Liberal Democrat Members who served on that Committee.

Many hon. Members have talked about the low turnout at the recent election and the disconnection between people and politics. The yah-boo politics, the time-wasting and the unnecessarily adversarial style in the House contribute more than anything to the alienation that is felt out there about politics and its relevance to peoples' lives. Being kept up all night to take part in debates makes no sense, does not mean that we make good law and is not a positive advertisement—

It being half-past Six o'clock, MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER put the Question, pursuant to Order [this day].

The House divided: Ayes 265, Noes 125.

Division No. 6]

[6.30 pm

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene (Paisley N)	Cooper, Yvette
Ainger, Nick	Corston, Jean
Ainsworth, Bob (Cov'try NE)	Cotter, Brian
Alexander, Douglas	Cousins, Jim
Allan, Richard	Cranston, Ross
Allen, Graham	Cruddas, Jon
Anderson, Janet (Rossendale)	Cunningham, Jim (Cov'try S)
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary	Davey, Valerie (Bristol W)
Atherton, Ms Candy	David, Wayne
Atkins, Charlotte	Davies, Geraint (Croydon C)
Austin, John	Dawson, Hilton
Bailey, Adrian	Dean, Mrs Janet
Baird, Vera	Dhanda, Parmjit
Banks, Tony	Dobbin, Jim
Barron, Kevin	Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Battle, John	Donohoe, Brian H
Bayley, Hugh	Dowd, Jim
Beard, Nigel	Drew, David
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret	Drown, Ms Julia
Begg, Miss Anne	Eagle, Angela (Wallasey)
Benn, Hilary	Eagle, Maria (L'pool Garston)
Bennett, Andrew	Efford, Clive
Benton, Joe	Ennis, Jeff
Berry, Roger	Ewing, Annabelle
Best, Harold	Fareilly, Paul
Betts, Clive	Field, Rt Hon Frank (Birkenhead)
Blackman, Liz	Flint, Caroline
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul	Follett, Barbara
Borrow, David	Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Bradley, Peter (The Wrekin)	Foster, Don (Bath)
Brinton, Mrs Helen	Foster, Michael Jabez (Hastings)
Brooke, Annette	Galloway, George
Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas (Newcastle E & Wallsend)	Gapes, Mike
Browne, Desmond	Gardiner, Barry
Bryant, Chris	Gerrard, Neil
Buck, Ms Karen	Gibson, Dr Ian
Burden, Richard	Gilroy, Linda
Burton, Colin	Goggins, Paul
Burnham, Andy	Green, Matthew (Ludlow)
Cable, Dr Vincent	Griffiths, Nigel (Edinburgh S)
Cairns, David	Griffiths, Win (Bridgend)
Campbell, Alan (Tynemouth)	Hain, Peter
Campbell, Mrs Anne (C'bridge)	Hamilton, Fabian (Leeds NE)
Campbell, Ronnie (Blyth V)	Hanson, David
Caton, Martin	Harris, Dr Evan (Oxford W)
Challen, Colin	Harris, Tom (Glasgow Cathcart)
Clark, Dr Lynda (Edinburgh Pentlands)	Havard, Dai
Clark, Paul (Gillingham)	Healey, John
Clarke, Charles (Norwich S)	Henderson, Doug (Newcastle N)
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom (Coatbridge)	Henderson, Ivan (Harwich)
Clwyd, Ann	Hendrick, Mark
Colley, Ms Ann	Heppell, John
Coleman, Iain	Heyes, David
Colman, Tony	Hill, Keith
Cook, Rt Hon Robin (Livingston)	Holmes, Paul
	Hood, Jimmy
	Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey

Howarth, Rt Hon Alan (*Newport E*)
 Howarth, George (*Knowsley N*)
 Hoyle, Lindsay
 Hughes, Beverley (*Stretford*)
 Humble, Mrs Joan
 Hurst, Alan
 Iddon, Dr Brian
 Illsley, Eric
 Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
 Jackson, Glenda (*Hampstead*)
 Jackson, Helen (*Hillsborough*)
 Jenkins, Brian
 Johnson, Miss Melanie
 (*Welwyn Hatfield*)
 Jones, Kevan (*N Durham*)
 Jones, Martyn (*Clwyd S*)
 Jowell, Rt Hon Tessa
 Joyce, Eric
 Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
 Keeble, Ms Sally
 Keen, Alan (*Feltham & Heston*)
 Keen, Ann (*Brentford & Isleworth*)
 Kemp, Fraser
 Khabra, Piara S
 Kidney, David
 King, Andy (*Rugby & Kenilworth*)
 King, Ms Oona (*Bethnal Green*)
 Knight, Jim (*S Dorset*)
 Kumar, Dr Ashok
 Ladyman, Dr Stephen
 Lamb, Norman
 Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
 Laxton, Bob
 Leslie, Christopher
 Levitt, Tom
 Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
 Linton, Martin
 Lloyd, Tony
 Love, Andrew
 Lucas, Ian
 Luke, Iain
 Lyons, John
 McAvooy, Thomas
 McFall, John
 McGuire, Mrs Anne
 McIsaac, Shona
 McKechn, Ann
 McKenna, Rosemary
 Mackinlay, Andrew
 McNulty, Tony
 MacTaggart, Fiona
 McWalter, Tony
 McWilliam, John
 Mahmood, Khalid
 Mallaber, Judy
 Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Gordon (*Blackpool S*)
 Marshall, David (*Shettleston*)
 Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
 Miliband, David
 Miller, Andrew
 Moffatt, Laura
 Moran, Margaret
 Morgan, Julie
 Mullin, Chris
 Munn, Ms Meg
 Murphy, Jim (*Eastwood*)
 Norris, Dan
 O'Brien, Mike (*N Warks*)
 Olier, Bill
 Osborne, Sandra (*Ayr*)
 Palmer, Dr Nick
 Pearson, Ian
 Perham, Linda

Pickthall, Colin
 Pike, Peter
 Plaskitt, James
 Pond, Chris
 Pound, Stephen
 Prentice, Ms Bridget (*Lewisham E*)
 Prentice, Gordon (*Pendle*)
 Prosser, Gwyn
 Purchase, Ken
 Purnell, James
 Quinn, Lawrie
 Rapson, Syd
 Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
 Rendel, David
 Robertson, John
 (*Glasgow Anniesland*)
 Ruddock, Joan
 Russell, Ms Christine (*Chester*)
 Ryan, Joan
 Salter, Martin
 Sarwar, Mohammad
 Savidge, Malcolm
 Sedgmore, Brian
 Shaw, Jonathan
 Sheerman, Barry
 Shipley, Ms Debra
 Simon, Siôn
 Simpson, Alan (*Nottingham S*)
 Skinner, Dennis
 Smith, Rt Hon Andrew (*Oxford E*)
 Smith, Rt Hon Chris (*Islington S*)
 Smith, Jacqui (*Redditch*)
 Smith, Llew (*Blaenau Gwent*)
 Soley, Clive
 Southworth, Helen
 Squire, Rachel
 Starkey, Dr Phyllis
 Stevenson, George
 Stewart, Ian (*Eccles*)
 Stinchcombe, Paul
 Stoate, Dr Howard
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Ms Gisela
 Stunell, Andrew
 Sutcliffe, Gerry
 Tami, Mark
 Taylor, Rt Hon Ann (*Dewsbury*)
 Taylor, Ms Dairi (*Stockton S*)
 Taylor, David (*NW Leics*)
 Thomas, Gareth (*Clwyd W*)
 Thomas, Gareth R (*Harrow W*)
 Tipping, Paddy
 Todd, Mark
 Turner, Dennis (*Wolverhampton SE*)
 Turner, Dr Desmond (*Kemptown*)
 Turner, Neil (*Wigan*)
 Twigg, Derek (*Hallon*)
 Twigg, Stephen (*Enfield*)
 Tyler, Paul
 Tynan, Bill
 Walley, Ms Joan
 Ward, Ms Claire
 Watson, Tom
 Watts, David
 Weir, Michael
 White, Brian
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Wicks, Malcolm
 Williams, Mrs Betty (*Conwy*)
 Willis, Phil
 Wills, Michael
 Winnick, David
 Winterton, Ms Rosie (*Doncaster C*)
 Wood, Mike
 Woolas, Phil
 Worthington, Tony

Wright, David (*Telford*)
 Wright, Tony (*Cannock*)
 Wyatt, Derek

Amess, David
 Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
 Atkinson, Peter (*Hexham*)
 Bacon, Richard
 Baldry, Tony
 Barker, Greg
 Baron, John
 Bellingham, Henry
 Berrow, John
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boswell, Tim
 Bottomley, Peter (*Worthing W*)
 Brady, Graham
 Brazier, Julian
 Browning, Mrs Angela
 Burnside, David
 Burt, Alistair
 Butterfill, John
 Cameron, David
 Cash, William
 Chope, Christopher
 Clappison, James
 Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth
 (*Rushcliffe*)
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Collins, Tim
 Cormack, Sir Patrick
 Cran, James
 Curry, Rt Hon David
 Davis, Rt Hon David (*Haltemprice*)
 Djanogly, Jonathan
 Dodds, Nigel
 Duncan, Alan
 Duncan Smith, Iain
 Duncan, Peter
 Evans, Nigel
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, Michael
 Field, Mark (*Cities of London*)
 Flight, Howard
 Flock, Adrian
 Forth, Rt Hon Eric
 Francois, Mark
 Gale, Roger
 Garnier, Edward
 Gibb, Nick
 Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
 Goodman, Paul
 Gray, James
 Grayling, Chris
 Green, Damian (*Ashtford*)
 Greenway, John
 Grieve, Dominic
 Hawkins, Nick
 Hayes, John
 Heald, Oliver
 Heath, David
 Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
 Hendry, Charles
 Hoban, Mark
 Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
 Horam, John
 Howard, Rt Hon Michael
 Jack, Rt Hon Michael

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mr. Ivor Caplin and
 Jim Fitzpatrick.

NOES

Jenkin, Bernard
 Kirkbride, Miss Julie
 Lait, Mrs Jacqui
 Lewis, Dr Julian (*New Forest E*)
 Liddell-Grainger, Ian
 Liddington, David
 Loughton, Tim
 Luff, Peter
 McIntosh, Miss Anne
 MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
 Maclean, Rt Hon David
 McLoughlin, Patrick
 Maples, John
 Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
 May, Mrs Theresa
 Mercer, Patrick
 Mitchell, Andrew (*Sutton Coldfield*)
 Morrison, Dr Andrew
 O'Brien, Stephen (*Eddisbury*)
 Osborne, George (*Tatton*)
 Ottaway, Richard
 Paice, James
 Paterson, Owen
 Pickles, Eric
 Prisk, Mark
 Randall, John
 Robertson, Hugh (*Faversham*)
 Robertson, Laurence (*Tewkesbury*)
 Roe, Mrs Marion
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sayeed, Jonathan
 Shepherd, Richard
 Simmonds, Mark
 Simpson, Keith (*Mid-Norfolk*)
 Soames, Nicholas
 Spelman, Mrs Caroline
 Spicer, Sir Michael
 Spink, Dr Robert
 Spring, Richard
 Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
 Steen, Anthony
 Swayne, Desmond
 Swire, Hugo
 Taylor, Ian (*Esher & Walton*)
 Taylor, John (*Solihull*)
 Taylor, Sir Teddy
 Thomas, Simon (*Ceredigion*)
 Tredinnick, David
 Trend, Michael
 Turner, Andrew (*Isle of Wight*)
 Viggers, Peter
 Waterson, Nigel
 Watkinson, Angela
 Whittingdale, John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wilkinson, John
 Willetts, David
 Winterton, Mrs Ann (*Congleton*)
 Winterton, Nicholas (*Macclesfield*)
 Yeo, Tim
 Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mr. Edward Leigh and
 Mr. Gerald Howarth.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That in the current Session of Parliament Orders A to I below shall have effect:

A. Programme Motions

(1) If, before second reading of a bill, notice of a motion providing—

- (a) for committal of the bill, and
- (b) for any proceedings on the bill to be programmed,

is given by a Minister of the Crown, the motion may be made immediately after second reading, and Standing Order No. 63 shall not apply to the Bill.

(2) Such a motion is to be called a programme motion.

(3) An order made by the House as a result of a programme motion is to be called a programme order.

(4) A motion to vary or supplement a programme order is also to be called a programme motion.

(5) A programme motion may provide for the allocation of time for any proceedings on a bill.

(6) Except in the following three cases, or where paragraph (8) of Programme Order B (Programming Committees) applies, the question on a programme motion is to be put forthwith.

(7) The first exception is where—

- (a) a Standing Committee has reported a resolution under paragraph (11) of Sessional Order C (Programming Sub-Committees) proposing an alteration of the date by which the bill is to be reported to the House, and
- (b) the motion made under paragraph (12) of Sessional Order C (Programming Sub-Committees) does not give effect to the Standing Committee's proposal.

(8) The second exception is where the motion makes further provision for proceedings on consideration and third reading of the bill otherwise than in accordance with a resolution of a Programming Committee under paragraph (5) of Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) or a resolution of a Standing Committee under paragraph (13) of Sessional Order C (Programming Sub-Committees).

(9) The third exception is where the motion reduces the amount of time allocated under a programme order for any proceedings on the bill (whether or not it also increases the amount of time allocated for other proceedings on the bill).

(10) In an excepted case, any question necessary to dispose of proceedings on a programme motion is to be put not later than three-quarters of an hour after the commencement of proceedings on the motion.

(11) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted Business) applies to proceedings on a programme motion.

(12) Standing Order No. 83 (Allocation of Time) does not apply to a programme motion.

(13) If a programme order applies to a bill, neither Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) nor Standing Order No. 120 (Business Sub-Committee) applies to the bill.

B. Programming Committees

(1) This order applies if proceedings in committee of the whole House or on consideration and third reading are subject to a programme order.

(2) There is to be a committee for the bill consisting of—

- (a) the Chairman of Ways and Means (who is to be chairman of the committee); and
- (b) not more than eight other Members, nominated by the Speaker.

(3) The committee is to be called the Programming Committee.

(4) The quorum of the Programming Committee is four.

(5) The Programming Committee shall consider the allocation of time to proceedings in committee of the whole House or on consideration and third reading and report any resolution which it makes to the House.

(6) Proceedings in the Programming Committee shall be brought to a conclusion not later than two hours after their commencement.

(7) For the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (6), the chairman shall—

- (a) first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided; and
- (b) then put successively questions on any motions made by a Minister of the Crown.

(8) On a motion being made in the House relating to a resolution of the Programming Committee, any question necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion shall be put not later than three-quarters of an hour after the commencement of those proceedings.

(9) If such a motion is agreed to, its provisions shall have effect as if they were included in the programme order for the bill.

(10) Proceedings on a motion made under paragraph (8) may be entered upon and decided, though opposed, at any hour.

(11) Resolutions of the Programming Committee—

- (a) may be reported from time to time; and
- (b) subject to the powers of the Speaker or Chairman to select the amendments, new clauses and new schedules to be proposed, may include alterations in the order in which specified proceedings on the bill are to be taken.

C. Programming Sub-Committees

(1) If a bill is subject to a programme order which commits it to a standing committee, the order stands referred to the committee and shall be considered by a sub-committee of the committee.

(2) The sub-committee is to be called the Programming Sub-Committee.

(3) The Programming Sub-Committee shall consist of—

- (a) the chairman or one of the chairmen of the committee (who is to be chairman of the sub-committee); and
- (b) seven members of the committee, nominated by the Speaker.

(4) The quorum of the Programming Sub-Committee is four.

(5) The Programming Sub-Committee shall report to the committee any resolution which it makes about—

- (a) the number of sittings to be allotted to the consideration of the bill in the committee;
- (b) the allocation of the proceedings to each sitting;
- (c) the time at which any proceedings, if not previously concluded, are to be brought to a conclusion;
- (d) the date by which the bill is to be reported to the House;
- (e) the programming of consideration and third reading.

(6) Proceedings in the Programming Sub-Committee shall be brought to a conclusion not later than two hours after their commencement.

(7) For the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (6), the chairman shall—

- (a) first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet been decided; and
- (b) then put forthwith successively questions on any motions made by a Minister of the Crown.

(8) Resolutions of the Programming Sub-Committee—

- (a) may be reported from time to time; and
- (b) subject to the powers of the chairman to select the amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be proposed, may include alterations in the order in which specified proceedings are to be taken.

(9) On a motion in the terms of a resolution of the Programming Sub-Committee being made in the committee, any question necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion is to be put not later than half an hour after the commencement of those proceedings.

(10) If the provisions of a resolution of the Programming Sub-Committee under sub-paragraphs (a), (b) or (c) of paragraph (5) are agreed to (with or without modification) by the committee, the provisions (or the provisions as modified) are to have effect as if they were included in the programme order for the bill.

(11) Any resolution of the committee—

(a) proposing an alteration to the date by which the Bill is to be reported to the House; or

(b) making a recommendation about the programming of the Bill on consideration and third reading;

shall be reported to the House.

(12) If a resolution is reported proposing an alteration to the date by which the Bill is to be reported to the House, a supplemental programme motion shall be set down for a day not later than the fifth sitting day after the day when the report was made which may—

(a) give effect to the Committee's proposal;

(b) otherwise alter or supplement the provisions of the original programme of the bill; or

(c) confirm the date set in the original programme order for the bill.

(13) If a resolution is reported making a recommendation about the programming of the Bill on consideration and third reading, a supplemental programme motion shall be set down before the consideration of the bill on report which may—

(a) give effect to the Committee's recommendations;

(b) otherwise alter or supplement the provisions of the original programme of the bill; or

(c) confirm the original programme order for the bill.

D. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings in Standing Committee or in Committee of the whole House

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings in standing committee or in committee of the whole House to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The chairman shall put forthwith the following questions (but no others)—

(a) any question already proposed from the chair;

(b) any question necessary to bring to a decision a question so proposed;

(c) the question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the chairman for separate division;

(d) the question on any amendment moved or motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(3) On a motion made for a new clause or a new schedule, the chairman shall put only the question that the clause or schedule be added to the bill.

(4) If two or more questions would fall to be put under paragraph (2)(d) on successive amendments moved or motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the chairman shall instead put a single question in relation to those amendments or motions.

(5) If two or more questions would fall to be put under paragraph (2)(c) in relation to successive provisions of the bill, the chairman shall instead put a single question in relation to those provisions.

(6) On conclusion of the proceedings in a committee, the chairman shall report the bill (or such of the bill's provisions as were committed to it) to the House without putting any question.

E. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration or third reading

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings on consideration and third reading to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall put forthwith the following questions (but no others)—

(a) any question already proposed from the chair;

(b) any question necessary to bring to a decision a question so proposed;

(c) the question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the Speaker for separate division;

(d) the question on any amendment moved or motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(3) On a motion made for a new clause or a new schedule, the Speaker shall put only the question that the clause or schedule be added to the bill.

(4) If two or more questions would fall to be put under paragraph (2)(d) on successive amendments moved or motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Speaker shall instead put a single question in relation to those amendments or motions.

F. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided.

(3) If that question is for the amendment of a Lords Amendment, the Speaker shall then put forthwith—

(a) a single question on any further amendments of the Lords Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown; and

(b) the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(4) The Speaker shall then put forthwith—

(a) a single question on any amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown to a Lords Amendment; and

(b) the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House disagrees with the Lords in a Lords Amendment.

(6) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question that this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Amendments.

(7) As soon as the House has—

(a) agreed or disagreed with the Lords in any of their Amendments; or

(b) disposed of an amendment relevant to a Lords Amendment which has been disagreed to,

the Speaker shall put forthwith a single question on any amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown relevant to the Lords Amendment.

G. Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords

(1) This order applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings on any further message from the Lords to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided.

(3) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown which is related to the question already proposed from the chair.

(4) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister on or relevant to any of the remaining items in the Lords message.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the question that this House agrees with the Lords in all of the remaining Lords proposals.

H. Programme orders: Reasons Committee

(1) This order applies in relation to any Committee to be appointed to draw up Reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with a programme order.

(2) The Speaker shall put forthwith the question on any motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the appointment, nomination and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the appointment of its chairman.

(3) The Committee shall report before the conclusion of the sitting at which it is appointed.

(4) Proceedings in the Committee shall be brought to a conclusion not later than half an hour after their commencement.

(5) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (4), the chairman shall—

- (a) first put forthwith any question which has been proposed from the chair and not yet decided; and
- (b) then put forthwith successively questions on motions which may be made by a Minister of the Crown for assigning a Reason for disagreeing with the Lords in any of their Amendments.

(6) The proceedings of the Committee shall be reported without any further question being put.

I. Programme orders: supplementary provisions

(1) The provisions of this order apply to proceedings in the House or in Committee of the whole House on a bill which is subject to a programme order.

(2) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) applies to the proceedings for any period after ten o'clock (or on Thursday, seven o'clock) allocated to them in accordance with the programme order.

(3) The proceedings may not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(4) If, on a day on which the bill has been set down to be taken as an order of the day, a motion for the adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration) would, apart from this order, stand over to Seven o'clock—

- (a) that motion stands over until the conclusion of any proceedings on the bill which, in accordance with the programme order, are to be brought to conclusion at or before that time; and
- (b) the bringing to a conclusion of any proceedings on the bill which, in accordance with the programme order, are to be brought to a conclusion after that time is postponed for a period of time equal to the duration of the proceedings on that motion.

(5) If a day on which the bill has been set down to be taken as an order of the day is one to which a motion for the adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 24 stands over from an earlier day, the bringing to a conclusion of any proceedings on the bill which, in accordance with the programme order, are to be brought to a conclusion on that day is postponed for a period equal to the duration of the proceedings on that motion.

(6) No dilatory motion may be made in relation to the proceedings except by a Minister of the Crown; and the question on any such motion is to be put forthwith.

(7) If at any sitting the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the expiry of the period at the end of which proceedings are to be brought to a conclusion under a programme order, no notice is required of a motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of the programme order.

Deferred Divisions

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Order [this day].

That in the current Session of Parliament the following Order shall have effect:

(1) Except as provided in paragraph (2), Standing Order No. 38 (Procedure on divisions) shall not apply if, after the time for the interruption of business, the opinion of the Speaker as to the decision on a question is challenged in respect of any question.

(2) Standing Order No. 38 (Procedure on divisions) shall apply (and this order shall not apply) to questions—

- (a) on motions or amendments in the course of proceedings on bills or allocating time to or programming such proceedings;
- (b) on motions which may be made without notice;
- (c) on motions to be disposed of immediately following the disposal of amendments proposed thereto, and on such amendments;
- (d) on motions made under—
 - (i) paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business);
 - (ii) paragraph (3) of Standing Order No. 51 (Ways and means motions);
 - (iii) Sub-paragraph (1)(a) of Standing Order No. 52 (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills);
 - (iv) paragraph (5) of Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of estimates); and
 - (v) paragraph (1) of Standing Order No. 55 (Questions on voting of estimates, &c.); and
- (e) on motions made under paragraph 3 below or to which an order made under that paragraph applies.

(3) After the moment of interruption and the conclusion of proceedings under any other Standing Order which fall to be taken immediately after it, a Minister of the Crown may make a motion to the effect that this order shall not apply to questions on any specified motions; such motion may be proceeded with, though opposed, and the question thereon shall be put forthwith.

(4) If the opinion of the Speaker is challenged under paragraph (1) of this order, he shall defer the division until half-past Three o'clock on the next Wednesday on which the House shall sit.

(5) On any Wednesday to which a division has been deferred under paragraph (4) above—

- (a) Members may record their votes on the question under arrangements made by the Speaker;
- (b) votes may be recorded for one and a half hours after half-past Three o'clock, no account being taken of any period during which the House or committee proceeds to a division; and
- (c) the Speaker, or the Chairman, shall announce the result of the deferred division as soon as may be after the expiry of the period mentioned in sub-paragraph (b) above.—[Mr. Heppell.]

The House divided: Ayes 268, Noes 130.

Division No. 7]

[6.43 pm

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene (Paisley N)	Austin, John
Ainger, Nick	Bailey, Adrian
Ainsworth, Bob (Cov'ty NE)	Baird, Vera
Alexander, Douglas	Banks, Tony
Allen, Richard	Barron, Kevin
Allen, Graham	Battle, John
Anderson, Janet (Rossendale)	Bayley, Hugh
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary	Beard, Nigel
Atherton, Ms Candy	Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Atkins, Charlotte	Begg, Miss Anne

Benn, Hilary
 Bennett, Andrew
 Benton, Joe
 Berry, Roger
 Best, Harold
 Betts, Clive
 Blackman, Liz
 Borrow, David
 Bradley, Peter (*The Wrekin*)
 Brinton, Mrs Helen
 Brooke, Annette
 Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas
 (*Newcastle E & Wallsend*)
 Browne, Desmond
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Colin
 Burnham, Andy
 Cable, Dr Vincent
 Cairns, David
 Campbell, Alan (*Tynemouth*)
 Campbell, Mrs Anne (*C'bridge*)
 Campbell, Ronnie (*Blyth V*)
 Cann, Jamie
 Caton, Martin
 Challen, Colin
 Chapman, Ben (*Miral S*)
 Clark, Dr Lynda
 (*Edinburgh Pentlands*)
 Clark, Paul (*Gillingham*)
 Clarke, Charles (*Norwich S*)
 Clarke, Rt Hon Tom (*Coatbridge*)
 Coffey, Ms Ann
 Coleman, Iain
 Colman, Tony
 Cook, Rt Hon Robin (*Livingston*)
 Cooper, Yvette
 Corston, Jean
 Cotter, Brian
 Cousins, Jim
 Cranston, Ross
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cunningham, Jim (*Cov'try S*)
 Davey, Valerie (*Bristol W*)
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint (*Croydon C*)
 Dawson, Hilton
 Dean, Mrs Janet
 Dhanda, Parmjit
 Dobbin, Jim
 Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
 Donohoe, Brian H
 Dowd, Jim
 Drew, David
 Drown, Ms Julia
 Eagle, Angela (*Wallasey*)
 Eagle, Maria (*L'pool Garston*)
 Efford, Clive
 Ennis, Jeff
 Ewing, Annabelle
 Farrelly, Paul
 Field, Rt Hon Frank (*Birkenhead*)
 Flint, Caroline
 Follett, Barbara
 Foster, Rt Hon Derek
 Foster, Don (*Bath*)
 Foster, Michael Jabez (*Hastings*)
 Galloway, George
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gerrard, Neil
 Gibson, Dr Ian
 Gilroy, Linda
 Goggins, Paul
 Green, Matthew (*Ludlow*)

Griffiths, Jane (*Reading E*)
 Griffiths, Nigel (*Edinburgh S*)
 Griffiths, Win (*Bridgend*)
 Hain, Peter
 Hamilton, Fabian (*Leeds NE*)
 Hanson, David
 Harris, Dr Evan (*Oxford W*)
 Harris, Tom (*Glasgow Cathcart*)
 Havard, Dai
 Healey, John
 Heath, David
 Henderson, Doug (*Newcastle N*)
 Henderson, Ivan (*Harwich*)
 Hendrick, Mark
 Heppell, John
 Heyes, David
 Hill, Keith
 Holmes, Paul
 Hood, Jimmy
 Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
 Howarth, Rt Hon Alan (*Newport E*)
 Howarth, George (*Knowsley N*)
 Hoyle, Lindsay
 Hughes, Beverley (*Stretford*)
 Humble, Mrs Joan
 Hurst, Alan
 Iddon, Dr Brian
 Ilisley, Eric
 Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
 Jackson, Glenda (*Hampstead*)
 Jackson, Helen (*Hillsborough*)
 Jenkins, Brian
 Johnson, Alan (*Hull W & Hessle*)
 Johnson, Miss Melanie
 (*Welwyn Hatfield*)
 Jones, Kevan (*N Durham*)
 Jones, Martyn (*Chwyd S*)
 Jowell, Rt Hon Tessa
 Joyce, Eric
 Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
 Keeble, Ms Sally
 Keen, Alan (*Feltham & Heston*)
 Keen, Ann (*Brentford & Isleworth*)
 Kemp, Fraser
 Khabra, Piana S
 Kidney, David
 King, Andy (*Rugby & Kenilworth*)
 King, Ms Oona (*Bethnal Green*)
 Knight, Jim (*S Dorset*)
 Kumar, Dr Ashok
 Ladyman, Dr Stephen
 Lamb, Norman
 Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
 Laxton, Bob
 Leslie, Christopher
 Levitt, Tom
 Lewis, Ivan (*Bury S*)
 Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
 Linton, Martin
 Lloyd, Tony
 Love, Andrew
 Lucas, Ian
 Luke, Iain
 Lyons, John
 McAvo, Thomas
 McFall, John
 McGuire, Mrs Anne
 McIsaac, Shona
 McKechn, Ann
 McKenna, Rosemary
 McNulty, Tony
 Mactaggart, Fiona
 McWalter, Tony
 McWilliam, John
 Mahmood, Khalid
 Mallaber, Judy

Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Gordon (*Blackpool S*)
 Marshall, David (*Shettleston*)
 Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
 Miliband, David
 Miller, Andrew
 Moffatt, Laura
 Moran, Margaret
 Morgan, Julie
 Mullin, Chris
 Munn, Ms Meg
 Murphy, Jim (*Eastwood*)
 Norris, Dan
 O'Brien, Mike (*N Warks*)
 Olier, Bill
 Osborne, Sandra (*Ayr*)
 Palmer, Dr Nick
 Pearson, Ian
 Perham, Linda
 Picking, Anne
 Pickthall, Colin
 Pike, Peter
 Plaskitt, James
 Pond, Chris
 Pound, Stephen
 Prentice, Ms Bridget (*Lewisham E*)
 Prentice, Gordon (*Pandle*)
 Prosser, Gwyn
 Purchase, Ken
 Purnell, James
 Quinn, Lawrie
 Rapson, Syd
 Raynsford, Rt Hon Nick
 Rendel, David
 Robertson, John
 (*Glasgow Anniesland*)
 Ruddock, Joan
 Russell, Ms Christine (*Chester*)
 Ryan, Joan
 Salter, Martin
 Sarwar, Mohammad
 Savidge, Malcolm
 Sedgemore, Brian
 Shaw, Jonathan
 Sheeman, Barry
 Shipley, Ms Debra
 Simon, Siôn
 Simpson, Alan (*Nottingham S*)
 Smith, Rt Hon Andrew (*Oxford E*)
 Smith, Rt Hon Chris (*Islington S*)

Smith, Jacqui (*Redditch*)
 Smith, Llew (*Blaenau Gwent*)
 Soley, Clive
 Southworth, Helen
 Squire, Rachel
 Starkey, Dr Phyllis
 Stevenson, George
 Stewart, Ian (*Eccles*)
 Stinchcombe, Paul
 Stoate, Dr Howard
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Ms Gisela
 Stunell, Andrew
 Sutcliffe, Gerry
 Tami, Mark
 Taylor, Rt Hon Ann (*Dewsbury*)
 Taylor, Ms Dari (*Stockton S*)
 Taylor, David (*NW Leics*)
 Thomas, Gareth (*Chwyd W*)
 Thomas, Gareth R (*Harrow W*)
 Tipping, Paddy
 Todd, Mark
 Turner, Dennis (*Wolverhampton SE*)
 Turner, Dr Desmond (*Kemptown*)
 Turner, Neil (*Wigan*)
 Twigg, Derek (*Halton*)
 Twigg, Stephen (*Enfield*)
 Tyler, Paul
 Tynan, Bill
 Walley, Ms Joan
 Ward, Ms Claire
 Watson, Tom
 Watts, David
 Weir, Michael
 White, Brian
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Wicks, Malcolm
 Williams, Mrs Betty (*Conwy*)
 Willis, Phil
 Wills, Michael
 Winnick, David
 Winterton, Ms Rosie (*Doncaster C*)
 Wood, Mike
 Woolas, Phil
 Worthington, Tony
 Wright, David (*Telford*)
 Wright, Tony (*Cannock*)
 Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mr. Ivor Caplin and
 Jim Fitzpatrick.

NOES

Amess, David
 Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
 Atkinson, Peter (*Hexham*)
 Bacon, Richard
 Baldry, Tony
 Barker, Greg
 Barnes, Harry
 Baron, John
 Bellingham, Henry
 Bercow, John
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boswell, Tim
 Bottomley, Peter (*Worthing W*)
 Brady, Graham
 Brazier, Julian
 Browning, Mrs Angela
 Burnside, David
 Burt, Alistair
 Butterfill, John
 Cameron, David
 Cash, William
 Chope, Christopher
 Clappison, James
 Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth
 (*Rushcliffe*)
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Collins, Tim
 Corbyn, Jeremy
 Cornack, Sir Patrick
 Cran, James
 Cryer, John (*Hamchurch*)
 Curry, Rt Hon David
 Davis, Rt Hon David (*Haltemprice*)
 Djanogly, Jonathan
 Dodds, Nigel
 Duncan, Alan
 Duncan Smith, Iain
 Duncan, Peter
 Evans, Nigel
 Fabricant, Michael
 Field, Mark (*Cities of London*)
 Flight, Howard
 Flook, Adrian

Forth, Rt Hon Eric
 Francois, Mark
 Gale, Roger
 Garnier, Edward
 Gibb, Nick
 Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
 Goodman, Paul
 Gray, James
 Grayling, Chris
 Green, Damian (Ashford)
 Greenway, John
 Grieve, Dominic
 Gummer, Rt Hon John
 Hawkins, Nick
 Hayes, John
 Heald, Oliver
 Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
 Hendry, Charles
 Hermon, Lady
 Hoban, Mark
 Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Horam, John
 Howard, Rt Hon Michael
 Jack, Rt Hon Michael
 Jenkin, Bernard
 Kirkbride, Miss Julie
 Lait, Mrs Jacqui
 Lewis, Dr Julian (New Forest E)
 Liddell-Grainger, Ian
 Lidington, David
 Loughton, Tim
 Luff, Peter
 McIntosh, Miss Anne
 MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
 Mackinlay, Andrew
 Maclean, Rt Hon David
 McLoughlin, Patrick
 Maples, John
 Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
 May, Mrs Theresa
 Mercer, Patrick
 Mitchell, Andrew (Sutton Coldfield)
 Moss, Malcolm
 Murrison, Dr Andrew

O'Brien, Stephen (Eddisbury)
 Osborne, George (Tatton)
 Ottaway, Richard
 Paice, James
 Paterson, Owen
 Pickles, Eric
 Prisk, Mark
 Randall, John
 Robertson, Hugh (Faversham)
 Robertson, Laurence (Tewkesbury)
 Roe, Mrs Marion
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sayeed, Jonathan
 Simmonds, Mark
 Simpson, Keith (Mid-Norfolk)
 Skinner, Dennis
 Soames, Nicholas
 Spelman, Mrs Caroline
 Spicer, Sir Michael
 Spink, Dr Robert
 Spring, Richard
 Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
 Steen, Anthony
 Swayne, Desmond
 Swire, Hugo
 Taylor, Ian (Esher & Walton)
 Taylor, John (Solihull)
 Thomas, Simon (Ceredigion)
 Tredinnick, David
 Trend, Michael
 Turner, Andrew (Isle of Wight)
 Viggers, Peter
 Waterson, Nigel
 Watkinson, Angela
 Whittingdale, John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wilkinson, John
 Willetts, David
 Winterton, Mrs Ann (Congleton)
 Winterton, Nicholas (Macclesfield)
 Yeo, Tim
 Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mr. Edward Leigh and
 Mr. Gerald Howarth.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Business of the House

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 26th October, 2nd, 23rd and 30th November 2001, 11th, 18th and 25th January, 15th March, 12th and 19th April, 10th May, 21st June, 19th July 2002.—[Mr. Heppell.]

6.56 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): This is an important matter which—I am sure that you agree, Madam Deputy Speaker—signals an interesting departure from the long-established means of dealing with private Members' Bills. It will not have escaped the notice of the House that, unusually, this year it is proposed that the private Member's Bill cycle starts as early as 26 October and runs through November and January and on to July.

For some years, the precedent has been established that the final day for the consideration of private Members' Bills is on or about 19 July. In that sense, nothing new has been proposed, but there is a departure in the motion. I am rather disappointed but, frankly, unsurprised that nobody from the Government Front Bench has sought to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, to explain to the House why that change has been made. I do not want to read anything sinister or conspiratorial into that—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. If Members wish to remain in the Chamber, perhaps they could remain quiet while the right hon. Gentleman proceeds.

Mr. Forth: I should have thought that a change on that scale would require a certain amount of explanation. A small number of us take an interest in private Members' Bills. Indeed, if I remember rightly, when we last dealt with private Members' Bills just before Dissolution, as many as 26 Members were present, which gives an idea of the interest in such Bills in the House: out of 659 Members, 26 took the trouble to attend the House on a Friday although, regrettably, they witnessed a Bill fall because of the lack of a quorum.

At least 26 people, therefore, are potentially interested in the motion. I am glad that a few more are here today, perhaps we can engender greater interest in private Members' Bills. However, there is an interesting question to which as yet we have no answer—I hope that I will be able to elicit one from the Minister. We usually expect the cycle for private Members' Bills to start in January. That is a proper procedure which, once the ballot for such Bills has taken place, allows an appropriate period for the legitimate consultation that Members wish to undertake with outside interests—but not, I hope, with the Government. Far too many Government Bills are smuggled through via the process for private Members' Bills, although usually they are pretty obvious and few of them survive. Those Members who are fortunate enough to come high in the ballot may wish to have a legitimate consultation with outside interests and incorporate their suggestions in their Bill. My question is whether, given that someone—surprisingly and out of the blue—is suggesting that we accelerate the process and bring it forward to 26 October—

It being Seven o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Monday 2 July.—
[Mr. Heppell.]

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made,

That the Motion in the name of Secretary Estelle Morris relating to the draft Special Educational Needs Code of Practice shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved—[Mr. Heppell.]

Hon. Members: Object.

WELSH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made,

That, notwithstanding paragraph (1) of Standing Order No. 102 (Welsh Grand Committee (composition and business)), in respect of its meeting on Tuesday 3rd July, the Welsh Grand Committee shall consist of all Members representing Welsh constituencies, together with Mr. Nigel Evans and Mr. Robert Walter.—[Mr. Heppell.]

Hon. Members: Object.

Crime Reduction (Plymouth)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. Heppell.]

7 pm

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Plymouth is the largest city in the far south-west of England, and with its size and position as a major port come a variety of policing and safety challenges. Home to almost 260,000 people, my constituency of Plymouth, Sutton is part of the Devon and Cornwall constabulary area, geographically the largest policing area in England, with both rural and urban areas.

Between 1995 and 1998, young people in Plymouth rated crime and the fear of crime just behind poverty as the second worst thing about living in Plymouth. Young people were the most likely of any demographic group to be victims of crime. One in 15 young citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 was likely to be a victim of violence, and one in 14 was likely to be a victim of domestic burglary.

I am pleased to note that recent crime figures estimate that the national crime rate has declined by more than 6 per cent., and that this Government's anti-crime policies have contributed to a consistent decline in crime in the west country generally over the past few years. Home burglary, the handling of stolen goods, and fraud and forgery offences are all down by more than 15 per cent. in Plymouth.

In the 12 months to March 2001, even violent crime figures were going down in all but one of the eight wards in my constituency. However, after 30 years of relentlessly increasing crime rates, it will be some time before people feel a difference in their personal and community safety. In this debate, I want to draw to my hon. Friend's attention the achievement of our crime and disorder partnership, as well as to highlight some specific aspects of local crime fighting, in which the Government's further support will help to ensure that the outlook for Plymouth continues to improve.

The Government have a vital role to play in targeting resources and changing the law and criminal justice system to help communities in their fight against crime. However, active communities with statutory, voluntary and private organisations working in partnership are essential to achieving effective crime prevention and reduction.

Plymouth is an example of a can-do city that is creatively developing its own solutions in partnership with the guidance of supportive, prevention-focused Government policy. Such a partnership has operated in Plymouth longer than in most other parts of the country. With its mission statement to reduce crime and the fear of crime, the Plymouth community safety partnership consists of representatives from Plymouth city council, the police, the commercial and voluntary sectors, and the local health and fire departments.

The partnership evolved from joint agency work originally led by the Plymouth crime prevention panel in the late 1980s. In 1994, the Plymouth community safety strategy group was established. Inspired by the Morgan report, the chief constable, Sir John Evans, invited local authorities in his area to look at partnership as a way to build on the community policing principles for which the

[Linda Gilroy]

Devon and Cornwall constabulary are well known. Plymouth was therefore well placed to meet the requirements of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, to carry out a crime and disorder audit and to draw up a strategy to tackle the priorities identified by that audit.

If the Minister is not already aware of Plymouth's reputation for partnership work, I am sure he will soon become familiar with it. That audit showed significant achievements already arising from successful partnering and problem-solving policing. Domestic burglaries had declined by 54 per cent., and there had also been a substantial increase in detected drug crimes. Detection of possession was up 20 per cent., and trafficking detection was up 40 per cent. over the three-year period. There was, unfortunately, an overall 8.9 per cent. increase in reported violent crime during the review period. Not surprisingly, the audit also revealed a correlation between the wards with the highest social and economic deprivation and those with the greatest numbers of violent offenders and offences.

Eighty-four per cent. of students excluded from school were reported to be associated with crime. There was a strong correlation between alcohol excesses and disorder. The greatest public disorder occurred in the city centre and Plymouth's clubland areas.

Some of the partnership's additional primary findings were as follows: offenders per capita are young—predominantly 10 to 24 years old; one in 12 burgled homes has been burgled previously; and vehicle crime remains the largest category of crime in Plymouth.

Repeat offenders put disproportionate stresses on a range of Plymouth city agencies and account for a disproportionate amount of the city's crimes. For example, although drug-related crime accounts for only 2 per cent. of Plymouth's overall crime, more than 80 per cent. of acquisitive crime is related to drugs. That represents £1 million a week.

I strongly support our commitment to make Britain the toughest place in the western world for drug dealers. That is an ambitious challenge, which many constituents whom I met during the election campaign wanted realised. I shall work to support those in my constituency who are dedicated to tackling the mayhem that drug addiction causes.

I feel most strongly for the innocent bystanders. A feature of drug dealing in Plymouth appears to be that it is carried out in houses rather than on street corners. The lives of the people who live next door become a nightmare which they seem powerless to end. The police and the local authority are using the new powers that we introduced in the previous Parliament to implement antisocial behaviour orders.

We have new resources of approximately £220,000 over three years from the community action drugs fund. That will help to broaden and deepen the resources in the city for preventing and treating drug addiction. The successful bid for additional funds to enhance and extend the CCTV resources in the city centre will also help. I am pleased that the Government and the police authority have made funding available for recruiting 275 additional police officers in the west country. Forty-one will be based in Plymouth. Those additional resources are vital to help us to bear down on crime in our community.

The Minister can be confident that they will be well used, as the achievements of the community safety partnership show.

Since the partnership was formed in 1994, vehicle theft has decreased by 50 per cent. and burglary has dropped by 60 per cent. Since 1998, burglary in multi-let properties has been targeted and has decreased by 44 per cent. A project to tackle the 20 streets with the most burglaries has exceeded the 20 per cent. reduction target for the past year. Last year's target for reduction in theft of and from cars has been exceeded.

However, the Minister knows that as targets are achieved and exceeded each year, bearing down further on crime becomes ever more challenging. I have already referred to the most important reduction, which is that in violent crime. Last year's target was to contain the increase to 8 per cent. The outcome is a reduction of 8 per cent.

I want to consider some subjects that merit further attention. Bearing down further on violent crime means tackling domestic violence. The domestic violence strategy for the city will be launched next week, on 5 July, after extensive consultations between the partners. Although our city has done well from its applications for various funds, we were not lucky in the initial distribution of funding for domestic violence projects.

Domestic violence is an aspect of crime that perhaps lends itself less than others to targeted funding for targeted outcomes. One of the aims of work in the area is to ensure that incidents are reported. Policing that is targeted at reducing numbers can sometimes be subject to conflicting pressures because initial work may increase crime figures. I should be grateful if the Minister could tell the House about any future plans for enabling crime and disorder partnerships to do new work on domestic violence and whether there may be further rounds of funding for such work.

Plymouth would like to do some new work on proposals for a restorative justice programme for women. Women, often with young children, end up with a custodial sentence in proportionately greater numbers than their male counterparts. The Plymouth project builds on the good experience of the youth offending team in developing reparation schemes with young people. That may involve a meeting with a victim, or, when more appropriate, writing a letter, or work on a damaged community building. A similar approach for female criminals as an extra option for the courts to consider would often be better for the victims as well as being more successful in re-integrating the woman and her family.

My hon. Friend the Minister knows that Plymouth was one of the areas to pioneer arrest referral schemes for drug offences. It has also designed a project that takes a similar approach to offences committed under the influence of alcohol. The idea, drawn up by the Plymouth team, has attracted funding and is being used in other parts of Devon. Given the role that alcohol plays in disturbances in our very lively city, I hope that it will not be long before we see this scheme, which was invented in Plymouth, in action in Plymouth.

Having pioneered such work in relation to drugs, the partnership is now working even further upstream of the arrest referral point of intervention. The police are now working with other agencies to focus on drug users, when

it is believed that they are funding their habit—usually of fairly chaotic drug use—by theft or burglary. Getting them into early treatment prevents all the crimes that they might have committed before the evidence existed to arrest them. That saves individual people the cost of suffering those crimes and represents a saving on escalating costs to the public purse in terms of health, tackling crime and other public service budgets. It also reduces crime.

Earlier, I acknowledged the significant investment that has been made in CCTV, and the effective role that CCTV has played in reducing crime in the city. There will shortly be further investment in North Stonehouse and in upgrading the control room facilities, as a result of additional funding announced earlier this year. However, this will still leave a key area of the centre of Plymouth unmonitored. Emma place and the surrounding streets are part of a longstanding red-light area in which residents are keen to see some improvement to the quality of their lives. A bid for CCTV there was unfortunately not one of the successful bids earlier this year.

Small pockets of money are available from the Communities against Drugs funding and the CCTV bids granted earlier this year, which could contribute to the project but which do not quite add up to enough to give it an early start. I ask the Minister to be vigilant in monitoring whether there is any scope for finding money for the project, perhaps by re-allocating money from other projects that may be underspent. The project would complete CCTV oversight of the main trouble spots in the city centre. It would also mean a great deal to some of my constituents, who have been working to improve their area for some time.

“Finally, I want to mention another innovative project which is not looking so much for money as for support to do something that has the potential to have a significant impact on young people way beyond the bounds of Plymouth. Since becoming the Plymouth coroner in 1998, Mr. Nigel Meadows has campaigned for more open court hearings and made history by inviting schoolchildren to attend inquests into the deaths of drug users. When a case ends, the children are invited back in into court for a one-to-one session with Mr. Meadows and allowed to ask any questions they like. He has been trying to persuade the authorities to allow cameras into his court, so that many more people can see what goes on. He has approached the Home Office, been referred to the Lord Chief Justice and then been referred back to the Home Office. In desperation, he is now writing to our colleague the Attorney-General to tell him of his wish to open his court to cameras.

I appreciate that this may not be within the Minister's remit, but the problem appears to be that no one is willing to own the issue. Mr. Meadows also has plans to engage convicted drug users in attendance at his court as part of our innovative local rehabilitation programmes. As part of my former employment, I had to read the transcripts of coroner's inquests. They made grim reading and I can easily understand that hearing in court about the stark reality of how the life of a drug user—normally a young drug user—can end is a good way of achieving effective prevention and rehabilitation.

Five deaths from drugs in Plymouth have come to the coroner's attention during the past 10 days. I hope my hon. Friend will, as a matter of urgency, ensure that the Plymouth coroner's idea is given serious consideration.

Interpretation of section 41 of the Criminal Justice Act 1925 seems to be the sticking point. If the law needs to be changed to clarify the position, perhaps that could be considered.

My hon. Friend will forgive me for raising so many issues. I realise, of course, that an Adjournment debate is not the place for announcements to be made about such issues, but I hope that he will understand my enthusiasm to celebrate the creativity, innovation and, best of all, results that stem from Plymouth's community safety partnership experience.

Having learned of Plymouth's good track record in partnership and problem solving, I hope that the Minister will look at Plymouth as a good place to support the piloting of new schemes. A second audit is planned for this year, and the results will be useful to determine which of the measures that we have used will continue to work, further to bear down on crime in Plymouth. We have achieved good results thus far, but we have more work to do before our citizens, young and old alike, will feel a quantum difference in their personal safety.

I believe that Plymouth is at the cutting edge of partnership community safety and policing. Minister, please continue with legislation that supports Plymouth and other communities in bearing down on crime and pilot more problem-solving approaches in Plymouth. We make good use of funds and can help the Government to meet their targets. Come and visit Plymouth, celebrate our successes with us and ensure that we continue to have the chance to show how we can positively transform the quality of life of our constituents.

7.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Linda Gilroy) on securing the Adjournment debate for which she has been trying for some time. She will not be surprised to learn that my comments will echo much of what she said.

It is Government policy to increase police numbers. As a result, we have established the crime fighting fund to provide the necessary additional resources to all police forces. We have also provided extra resources to aid policing in rural areas. Devon and Cornwall police will recruit an extra 79 officers this year as a direct result of both those measures. In turn, the city of Plymouth will benefit from 16 more officers over the coming months.

The Government also recognise, however, that the fight against crime cannot be won by the police working alone. In some of the first legislation that we introduced on coming to power in 1997, we created crime and disorder partnerships to bring together at a local level all those with a part to play in reducing crime. The story of crime reduction in Plymouth is, as my hon. Friend said, an excellent example of what can be achieved by a wide variety of local agencies working in partnership, supported, when necessary, by central Government funding.

Plymouth reacted early to the principle set out by the Morgan report in 1991, which is that

“reduction of crime cannot be left to the police alone”.

It formed the Plymouth community safety strategy group in 1993, and a safer cities project followed, running from 1994 to 1997. Following the introduction of the Crime

[Mr. Bob Ainsworth]

and Disorder Act 1998, the Plymouth community safety partnership was formed by agencies that by then needed little convincing of the advantages of working together.

Since 1998, the partnership has run a range of projects funded by a number of Government programmes such as the crime reduction programme and the single regeneration budget, which have successfully targeted the most vulnerable and victimised areas of the city. Those programmes have helped to reduce domestic burglary, vehicle crime and violent crime—offences identified by the Government as being of most concern to the community.

An example is the homesafe project, which received £170,000 from the reducing burglary initiative. That was aimed at improving the security of houses of multiple occupation. Those houses, which, frequently, consisted of bedsits occupied by students, represented only 3 per cent. of local housing stock but accounted for 20 per cent. of domestic burglary. The scheme involved the city council housing department, the fire and rescue service, local private landlords and higher education colleges.

A security certificate scheme was developed, which encouraged private landlords to improve door and window security standards to a level that qualified them for a certificate. Only those landlords holding such a certificate would be recommended by the colleges to students looking for accommodation. Since 1998, burglary in those properties has dropped 44 per cent., compared with the national burglary reduction target of 25 per cent.

A further project called "Safe as Houses" was granted £72,000 under the reducing burglary initiative to improve security in 3,800 homes in 20 streets identified as suffering the highest incidence of burglary. As a result of those security improvements, burglary rates in those streets have dropped 22 per cent. since 1999. In the city as a whole, rates dropped by 17 per cent. in the year to September 2000, compared with 1999.

Vehicle crime has also been tackled through partnership involving all the key agencies. A variety of approaches have been adopted. Publicity using local radio and advertisements in the local press have targeted potential victims, giving simple precautionary advice that they should not leave property visible in parked vehicles. Offenders and potential offenders have been targeted through the TREADS motor project, which provides an understanding of cars and teaches driving skills to all young people, while providing extra programmes for those who are at risk or have been referred to the project through the youth offending team. More than 250 young people from Plymouth have been through the scheme since the beginning of the year, and it has led to a reduction in reoffending among this group.

Vulnerable sites such as car parks have been targeted for increased security. Two car parks have achieved the Association of Chief Police Officers secure car park standard, and £114,000 was granted under the crime reduction programme closed-circuit television scheme to assist by providing cameras for the car parks at Derriford hospital. That sustained activity addressing all elements of vehicle crime has reduced offences of taking a vehicle without consent by more than 50 per cent. since 1994. Over the last year the number of thefts from vehicles has fallen by 10.5 per cent., while the number of vehicle thefts has fallen by 13.2 per cent.

The partnership has also successfully targeted violent crime in public places and on licensed premises. A registration scheme for door staff on licensed premises has been introduced, requiring them to undergo training before being licensed to supervise doors.

The CCTV scheme at Derriford hospital, along with improved links with the health and ambulance services, has helped to reassure staff and reduce their vulnerability. As a result of those and other initiatives, violent crime in the city has fallen by 8 per cent. over the last year, as my hon. Friend said. That is a significant achievement, given the increases seen in many cities with similar problems.

The partnership is continuing to build on this success. I am aware that it has two further bids for Government funding for CCTV schemes. I assure my hon. Friend that the bids are being evaluated, and that we hope to decide shortly which have been successful.

Drugs continue to be a major influence on crime levels, and a recent concern is evidence that crack cocaine has begun circulating in the city. The Government have recognised the damage that drugs can do to local communities and have announced funding for all community safety partnerships to tackle the problem: the communities against drugs fund. The Plymouth partnership will receive £224,700 this year, and is actively developing plans to use the money to disrupt the local drugs market. Those plans will be produced in consultation with the drugs action team and the local police commander, whose willingness to consider and adopt a wide range of policing options has already contributed significantly to the successes enjoyed in the city.

Linda Gilroy: I am pleased that the Minister mentioned the local Chief Superintendent Pearce. Will he congratulate the superintendent and his team on coming down very hard on the recent advent of crack cocaine in the city, through Project Ovidian? That appears to have put the lid on the problem at least for the present, although we must remain vigilant.

Mr. Ainsworth: That is certainly what I intend to do. According to all that I have heard from officials in the Home Office, the superintendent's attitude to the partnership and to methods of working in the city have been innovative, and he has been supportive in employing policing methods that have delivered considerable success.

Although levels of crime in Plymouth remain above average, they are being reduced, but people's fear of crime often remains disproportionate to the actual risk. Reassurance from familiar and recognisable figures in the community often helps to address such fears. The Government have provided nearly £90,000 to fund the presence of 12 neighbourhood wardens in the city. They have been there since April this year, providing ready and visible reassurance and acting as the eyes and ears of the community, solving problems as they arise and connecting residents with additional services when required to do so.

Crime is often the product of a range of factors present in particular areas. The Government are addressing the underlying issues through a number of programmes in Plymouth, which include a new deal for communities programme, a health action zone, an employment zone, and an education action zone. The new deal for

communities programme is providing almost £49 million over 10 years to improve the infrastructure of a deprived community at the heart of the city, through an integrated approach to problem solving by the local people.

Reducing crime is a major issue that will be addressed in the first year of the new deal programme through a number of initiatives aimed particularly at burglary and drug abuse. A further eight constables are planned for the area covered to help to tackle crime and disorder and to reassure local people. A CCTV scheme is also planned, together with the development of the homesafe project. Work with excluded pupils and young persons and family drug support programmes will also be undertaken.

The first year programme will commence on 2 July, and on 5 July a domestic violence strategy is due to be signed by representatives of all the key agencies. The targets set in this strategy will also be incorporated in the city council corporate plan.

As the partnership commences its crime audit and consultation with the people of Plymouth in preparation for the new crime reduction strategy, its efforts will be supported by resources from the Government's partnership development fund, which has provided £1.7 million this year to help community safety partnerships in the south-west to improve their performance. A substantial part of this funding is aimed at improving the IT available to collect, analyse and share data within the partnership. That will provide geographical information systems, which allow crime hot spots to be accurately mapped and tracked, so enabling resources to be targeted more effectively at areas where crime is most threatening.

Plymouth has consistently shown the benefits that can be achieved through working in partnership. It has shown that, by identifying and targeting crime problems, real reductions can be made by focusing actions around the community safety model. That model combines activities

to improve law enforcement and crime prevention, and the rehabilitation of offenders. The experience that the partnership has gained will be invaluable as the new crime reduction strategy is developed and integrated with the broader regeneration work that is being taken forward in the city.

My hon. Friend raised the matter of the Plymouth coroner, Mr. Nigel Meadows, being able to allow cameras into his court. I am sorry if the Plymouth coroner feels that his inquiries about filming have not been dealt with appropriately. The issue is subject to the provisions of the Criminal Justice Act 1925, which prohibits photography in court. Whether the prohibition applies in the particular circumstances envisaged by the coroner is a matter for him to decide. That was explained to my hon. Friend's neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson), in correspondence on behalf of the coroner last year. The Government have no plans to amend the legislation. If further clarification is needed, I shall try to ensure that it is supplied.

Linda Gilroy: Would my hon. Friend also agree to further discussion and perhaps a meeting with the coroner? It is such an enterprising scheme, and we need every tool in our arsenal if we are to succeed in making this the toughest country in the western world on drug dealers.

Mr. Ainsworth: I would not be opposed to that. We want to listen to views, but I hope that my hon. Friend realises that there are many aspects to allowing cameras into court. If she makes those representations on behalf of the coroner, I promise to consider them and to respond as positively as I can.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Seven o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 28 June 2001

[SYLVIA HEAL in the Chair]

Road Safety

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[Mrs. McGuire.]

2.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Mr. David Jamieson): It is usual in Adjournment debates to congratulate the person who has been successful in securing the debate. As the debate was initiated by the Government, however, it would be inappropriate to congratulate myself.

I particularly welcome such an early opportunity to speak about the Government's record on road safety and our plans for the future. I also welcome to the debate the hon. Members for Poole (Mr. Syms) and for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) who are to speak for the Opposition parties. They may know more about this subject than I do—or, at least, they may be more familiar with some of the topics. However, I assure the hon. Member for Poole, who is shaking his head, that I have grasped some of the issues, in particular the considerable importance of this subject to all hon. Members.

The Government consider road safety to be a priority. The issue affects everyone and plays a fundamental role in our society in terms of health, environment and education. In the previous Parliament, we published a road safety strategy to underpin our goal for 2010 to reduce road deaths and serious injuries by 40 per cent. and by 50 per cent. for children. It is a sad fact that, although our record on road safety generally is very good, our record on road safety for children is not good at all—in fact, it is one of the worst in Europe.

The road safety strategy will help to meet a number of Government targets. The strategy will help to meet the Government's overall targets to cut accidents from all causes; to improve our child road safety record; to help wider environmental objectives, particularly the reduction of CO₂ and other emissions, such as nitrous oxide, and of course the reduction of noise; to build stronger communities and form part of measures to regenerate urban areas and marginalised communities; and to tackle road crime, such as dangerous driving, thus playing a key role in the wider crime reduction agenda.

It is a sobering thought that far more people die on the roads in this country than die using any other mode of transport. Last year, there were more than 3,400 deaths on our roads and 38,000 serious injuries. The long-term misery caused by these accidents—both to those who are injured and to their families—cannot and should not be underestimated. Some people never recover properly from their injuries, which may result in lifelong impairment. I am keen to make a difference and to promote policies that are proven to make a difference. The foundations for that were laid in March 2000 in our

road safety strategy "Tomorrow's roads: safer for everyone" by my predecessor, Lord Whitty. We have set ourselves some challenging targets for reducing deaths and serious injuries and it is essential that we meet those targets.

Such targets cannot be met, however, without the active co-operation of other people. In many respects, road safety is a local matter. Local authorities and police forces have the biggest role to play, but schools, health visitors and the voluntary sector all have their place too. I visited Gloucester last week to look at the safer city project, with which my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) may be familiar. It underlines the importance of co-operation among all those involved in safety in that area. I was impressed with their record on that scheme.

We should not forget that some of the most recent advances have come about through safer car design. We must, therefore, involve the motor industry. One year on from the start of the 10-year plan, it may be time to pause and ask ourselves some searching questions. Last year, we set a target that, in our opinion, was tough but achievable, if certain measures were adopted.

We must decide what is the acceptable level of casualties on our roads. In Bristol last week, at a road safety seminar that was organised by my Department, Dutch and Swedish speakers said that, given the money and the will, they could design their road system so that death and serious injury on the road would become a thing of the past. They were talking about sizeable sums of money and, it must be said, some inconvenience for motorists which some would call an attack on freedom. It is wrong to characterise road safety measures as anti-motorist, not least because drivers and their passengers make up the greatest number of casualties. Road safety measures are pro-motorist, at least in relation to the majority of responsible motorists. We must decide what we want. I do not intend to answer all those questions today, but I want this Chamber to reflect on some of the measures. We must decide what we are prepared to put up with, if that means less death and serious injury.

This debate is timely. We have just published the road casualty figures for 2000. They make fairly encouraging reading in most respects. For most road users, deaths and serious injuries are down. There were 9 per cent. fewer child deaths and serious injuries than in 1999. Alas, motor cycle casualties are moving in the opposite direction. Last year, there were 605 deaths and nearly 6,800 serious injuries. We are, however, on track to meet the targets that we set last year.

I cannot list everything that we have done since the strategy was published, but I will mention a few of the actions that we have taken. Our priority is to reduce child accidents, particularly pedestrian accidents where our record is not as good as that of some of our European counterparts. Our record is improving, but last year 107 child pedestrians were killed. In total, 191 children were killed in road accidents last year. That means that there were about two pedestrian accidents a day. We have only to imagine those numbers. The equivalent of a small primary school is being wiped out each year as a result of deaths through road injuries.

We have started a new national pilot programme of child pedestrian training using the Kerbcraft approach, which research showed worked well in Drumchapel, a

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suburb of Glasgow. The key feature of the scheme is that volunteers are trained to instruct the children by paid local organisers. Bids for the first three tranches of local posts are due to be submitted by 20 July 2001. We hope that the successful authorities will have the first 30 co-ordinators in post by January 2002.

We have published various road safety education materials, and, not least, the lesson plans that go with them. As a former teacher, I know how useful lesson plans can be. Many of our actions will benefit children, as well as others. Some of the materials available at the road safety conference last week, especially those for use with young children, do not necessarily supplant other parts of the curriculum. The sort of materials that could be used in the literacy hour—the big book approach, as I think that it is called in the early years—were shown and used successfully with younger children.

We must improve the way in which we train our drivers. We may never produce experienced drivers just by instructing them and putting them through a test. In 1998, 13 per cent. of drivers involved in injury accidents were aged 17 to 21, which is disproportionate to the overall number of drivers. That age group accounts for only 7 per cent. of licence holders. The accident propensity falls by 35 to 40 per cent. among 17 to 18-year-olds as a result of them gaining experience in the first year. We hope to improve on that figure. In the autumn, we hope to consult about a new way of structuring training for learner drivers. Our plans to add a visual test to the driver theory test are well advanced. That test will assess how quickly drivers see hazards. For more experienced drivers, we expect a report to be published in the autumn on work-related driving from an independent taskforce studying work-related accidents and what employers and employees alike can do about them.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): It is extremely useful to hear the Minister present this report one year into the Government's 10-year road safety strategy and 10-year plan for casualty reduction. He raises many issues that will be resolved in the next 12 months. Can he give a commitment that the Government will issue an annual report of this sort to parliamentarians, so that we can continue to monitor their progress and contribute ideas, as we shall today?

Mr. Jamieson: My hon. Friend has raised an important point. The figures that I have announced are reported annually. It would be timely to have an annual debate because there is so much interest in the issue in the House. Back Benchers may seek an Adjournment debate themselves or the Government may initiate a further debate on the subject. I shall take that idea to my Department and reflect on how best to produce ongoing figures. We need to see how those figures change to assess whether our policies are successfully achieving their targets.

We still have a drink-drive problem. Surveys illustrate that about 1 per cent. of drivers are above the legal limit at any given moment. There are more than 400 deaths a year as a result of accidents in which at least one driver is over the legal limit. Many of those people are impervious to persuasion and must be caught. We are

currently drafting a safety Bill and are considering whether to take the opportunity to improve police powers for that purpose and to introduce better ways to combat drink-driving, and drug-driving, which we now know a lot more about. We also need to tackle the problem of tired drivers. It would be difficult to legislate for that, but our research has provided more information, which we have passed on to the public as advice. We need to do more about that, and we will.

As I said earlier, last week I was in Bristol at my Department's annual conference on road safety. At that conference, we launched the first edition of a good practice guide on road safety, aimed mainly at people new to the area of road safety. We need more of them to deliver our expanded programme of integrated local transport. Last December's allocations gave scope for 8,000 local safety schemes to be completed in the next five years. We may not get it right first time. I am sure that experienced professionals will spot ways of improving the guide, but we will revise it from time to time. However, it is the first time that we have published a guide that gives so much detailed guidance to those involved with road safety.

In Bristol, we also launched a report on the Gloucester safer city project. The objective of that programme was to find out what would happen if a strategic approach that involved everybody—including local politicians—were taken in one city. It was successful. Early results indicate that, although the number of deaths and serious injuries is not sufficiently high for reductions to be statistically significant, since the programme began 38 per cent. fewer people have been killed or seriously injured—that is about 19 people a year. That demonstrates that a concentrated, driven effort can achieve results. Both these projects underline the importance of local safety initiatives. Local people, not central Government, know where the problems lie.

It is the job of Government to promote best practice and organise demonstration projects, and we will continue to do that. We have sought, and are evaluating, bids from many authorities to demonstrate measures on how to prevent the many accidents that happen on high streets, as we said that we would in the strategy. Those that we select will work with us to implement about five demonstration schemes on mixed-priority urban roads next year. We must tackle the matter of road safety on our high streets—which are also through routes—if we want towns to grow, regenerate, and be safe and pleasant places in which to live.

We have started to examine how to control traffic speeds. We are considering the first year's results of the pilot schemes to meet the costs of operating speed and red light cameras systematically. We will announce our conclusions as soon as possible. We are also well advanced with the report on rural road hierarchies that we owe to Parliament by the end of November. The aim of the report is to classify roads by use, in order to decide on and review speed limits. My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter), who sponsored the Adjournment debate held in the House on Tuesday night, may take an interest in that scheme.

We have taken to heart the point—made by the Automobile Association and others—that motorists need to feel that speed limits are right. That is a huge job and it marks a departure from a provider-driven

approach to a user-driven one. We continue to press in Brussels and Geneva for higher vehicle standards, which are important factors in reducing the effects of accidents, as well as in preventing them. We support the safety ratings that are published on new cars across Europe. They are a British invention and, in the next leap forward, we would like to see the introduction of pedestrian-friendly car fronts.

The Government are the first for a long time to have engaged motor cyclists—and the motor cycle industry—in constructive dialogue on safety and other matters. Just before the election, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears), now the Under-Secretary for State for Health, initiated a short debate on the issue. The recent increase in motor cycle accidents seems to be due to commuters travelling on mopeds and scooters. We must improve training. Last January, we introduced a training requirement for those with a driving licence who want to ride a moped. That will affect only new licence holders. Motor cyclists and the motor cycle industry accept that that is a problem that requires urgent action.

There was a welcome drop in the year 2000 figures for pedestrian and cycling casualties. That may be due to our continued efforts to protect such vulnerable road users by traffic-calming measures in residential areas and by increasing cyclists' interest in training schemes. It is possible to encourage walking and cycling while keeping the number of casualties down. Some of the better local authorities have demonstrated that it can be done.

The UK has a long and distinguished record on road safety publicity—so much so that the French are borrowing some of our ideas. We discovered that new campaigns fortify old ones, so we launched the Think! brand for all of them. Yesterday, we launched our latest Think! campaign, which is about speeding in towns and the significance of the stopping distances that we all learned—and have probably forgotten—for our driving tests. The physics of stopping distances is simple. Our television advertisement shows the difference between travelling at 30 mph and 35 mph. One needs 21 ft or 6.4 m more stopping distance just for that extra 5 mph. The Government's Think! campaign asks that motorists think about excess speed, particularly in busy high streets where children are going to school or pensioners are going to collect their pensions from the post office. We also ask drivers in the 30 mph zones to reflect on whether 30 mph is an appropriate speed at which to travel. We ask motorists to think about children on the roads, to consider whether the roads are wet, to consider the prevailing conditions and to obey not just the speed limits but to use good sense when driving.

I hope that my introductory remarks have underlined both the Government's and my personal commitment to road safety. I look forward to listening to and learning from the contributions to this important debate.

2.50 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I declare an interest. I am a director of a family business involved in building and road haulage. I do so in case I stray on to that subject and someone was to pick me up on that.

As I said privately to you earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker, I may have to leave before the end of the debate so that I can drive—safely—to Poole to attend a meeting

early this evening. I apologise if I am not present to hear all the contributions, in particular the Minister's winding-up speech.

I welcome the Minister to his new post. I much enjoyed sparring with his predecessor, the hon. Member for Streatham (Keith Hill), who is now Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household. I have no doubt that that tradition will continue with the current Minister, whom I have always found to be a genial and straight individual. I welcome the fact that the first debate that he has brought to this Chamber is on road safety. From the research that I have done on the topic, I see that he has certainly hit the ground running with the campaigns in Bristol and Gloucester.

The issue is vital. We seem to have adopted a different attitude to modes of transport and to the number of people killed or injured on the roads. Bearing in mind the personal tragedies that the Minister pointed out and the cost, which is estimated at £11 billion to the nation, we should all do more to reduce to an absolute minimum the number of tragedies that occur on our roads.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) who, when he was a Minister, was the first to set targets. I congratulate the Government on setting stringent targets—40 per cent. and 50 per cent. for children—for the future. It is correct to say that we have a good safety record in this country except on children, who must become a real priority. As the Minister said, the most recent figures issued show that we have made progress. However, it is becoming more difficult to make progress and to keep the pressure on.

The issue involves not only drivers, but cyclists, motor cyclists and pedestrians. Years ago, I was always told that, when driving, I should watch out for footballs if kids were about. I now watch people in London with mobile phones attached to their ear. They step straight off the pavement before they look left and right. That may be a matter for public education in the Minister's television advertising campaign. Many people who are engrossed in a conversation with their hairdresser or whoever have stepped out in front of a vehicle. I have seen many embarrassed people step out in front of a car, but fortunately the driver has been able to stop.

I welcome the Government's overall strategy and the high priority given to road safety, and it is good news that there is a good practice guide. A new television advertising campaign is definitely the right way forward. I agree with the Minister that it is good to focus at local level, because local people and local councils know where the problems lie.

There is sometimes a problem with the collection of statistics. Police forces do not collect many statistics for accidents, particularly for injuries sustained in accidents. People often complain that they will have to wait until someone is killed before something is done about a dreadful stretch of road where there have been several accidents but no one has been seriously injured. More of these statistics need to be included, so that appropriate measures can be taken.

In our recent very popular manifesto, we set out the Conservative party's policy. We are committed to setting up a road standards unit to collect statistics. One thing that we have not done well in this country is to produce performance indicators for roads. Australia

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and many other countries have gone further with that, so they can have better measurements for the flow of traffic, safety and design. Just as the rail industry has people to investigate problems, a road casualty investigation branch should be set up with the specific objective of looking at stretches of road, collecting statistics and making recommendations. As in the design of vehicles, the design of roads is an important factor in reducing casualties.

We have several concerns. We are slightly concerned that some of the home zone proposals will give a false sense of security to those who play on the roads. The Minister made a good point about speed: the lower the speed, the shorter the stopping distance. I was glad that he gave the distances in both feet and metres, which will please some of my constituents. If one is unfortunate enough to have an accident, the chances of getting away with a less serious injury are fairly substantial at a low speed.

One of the great successes of the past 25 years has been in relation to drink driving. The vast majority of people accept the drink-driving limit. Attitudes have changed and driving beyond the limit is frowned upon. I am concerned that we should not reduce a sensible limit that has worked well over the past 20 or 30 years. However, the evidence is that those who substantially break the limit are sometimes two or three times over it. There seems to be a hard core of drinkers. Penalties should focus on those who drink substantially over the limit and are the main cause of the problem.

Early in the last Parliament we heard from Canadians who had looked at the possibility of confiscating cars. In this country where we have company cars and cars bought on hire purchase that may not be such a workable proposal. But the focus must be on the hard core of heavy drinkers. If we reduce the present drink-driving limit, which has worked well, we will start to lose support from people who want to go out and have a glass of wine with a meal. They would never exceed the limit but they may feel that lowering the limit is setting an unfair agenda.

Mr. Kidney: When I looked into this I found that offenders who exceed the legal limit for alcohol in their blood when driving break down into two equal groups: one group comprises the frequent heavy drinkers who, as the hon. Gentleman says, massively exceed the legal limit, and the other comprises those who are somewhere around the legal limit. Research shows that once the quantity of alcohol exceeds 50 mg per 100 ml of blood, a person's judgment is much more restricted. Would it not therefore make sense to have a two-pronged approach? The first would be to tackle the high-risk offenders and the second would be to consider the limit of 50 mg instead of 80 mg.

Mr. Syms: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but if one looks at the accident charts one can see that the arrow quickly shoots up into the air when people start to go beyond the limit. The main focus must be on the heavy drinkers—the people who do not know what day it is and whether they have hit three cars—rather than on changing a limit that is widely supported and works well.

It always amazes me that so many people on NHS-prescribed drugs continue to drive. I am concerned that people do not always read what is written on the packet. People are sometimes drugged up to the eyeballs on NHS prescriptions, yet drive because it is part of their everyday life. That needs to be examined. The Minister talked about tiredness—an important subject, which any hon. Member representing a Plymouth constituency could raise. It is good that there are more motorway service stations than previously and that road network provision has improved with places to pull in, although we do not provide as many toilets by the side of the road as we should.

The issue of road safety will not be a great political battleground. There is House-wide support for making improvements. It will be hard to do so, but if we follow the Minister's creative examples of a good practice guide and a television campaign, we should continue to make progress. I look forward to congratulating him at the end of his period in office. If he does nothing other than make good progress in road safety, he will deserve our congratulations.

3.1 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr. Winterton—or, is it correct to call you Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): Unfortunately, hon. Members are not as yet permitted in this Parliament to address me in that way. I regret it and hope that it will not be long before I get the distinction and honour that I richly deserve.

Mr. Kidney: I am with you on that, Mr. Winterton.

I declare a non-pecuniary interest in the debate in that I co-chair the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety with the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley), who has already been mentioned in this debate. PACTS is a registered charity which provides research-based solutions to and impartial advice on all aspects of transport safety. Its main aim is to save lives. PACTS has established positions on several road safety issues—to which I will refer later—including wearing seat belts, the reduction in the maximum permitted blood-alcohol level for drivers, the deployment of safety cameras and the improvement in vehicle design. I shall make it clear when I am explaining the PACTS position. Otherwise, the content of my speech reflects my personal opinions.

In Great Britain in 1999, five people died in transport incidents at sea, six died in air transport-related incidents, 43 died on our railways—mainly in the Paddington rail crash—and 885 people were the victims of homicide. In comparison, 3,404 people lost their lives on the roads. In an Adjournment debate last Tuesday, the Minister gave the figure for road deaths in 2000: another 3,409 people. Why do we tolerate such a huge loss of life year after year? In fairness to the Labour Government since 1997 and the previous Conservative Government, the death toll fell by one third between 1990 and 1999. Being fairer still to them both, the previous Conservative Government set a target to drive down the number of road deaths, as did the Labour Government. The Government now aim to reduce

deaths by 40 per cent.—50 per cent. in the case of children—by 2010. The same targets apply for reducing serious injuries.

I welcome the Minister to his job and thank him wholeheartedly for this early opportunity to debate road safety. It allows us to express our horror at such continual loss of life, to call for action to achieve and exceed the Government's target for reducing road deaths, and to contribute our ideas for reducing the carnage.

I start by considering speed management. If a car travelling at 40 mph hits a child, there is a one in 20 chance of that child surviving; if the car travels at 20 mph, the survival rate is 19 in 20. However, that should not lead us to conclude that reducing vehicle speed across the board makes roads safer because, conversely, there are situations where slow speeds represent a danger. Nor is reducing the legal speed limit synonymous with reducing vehicle speed. About two thirds of drivers already break the 30 mph speed limit, which tells us that we face big challenges in both education and enforcement if we are to persuade drivers to mind their speed.

Education might begin with a reminder that drivers should match their speed with the prevailing road conditions. In many daily situations, that will mean that the appropriate speed is less than the posted maximum—an obvious example being when driving in fog or approaching a sharp bend. The Government and many organisations, including PACTS, accept the argument that excess speed, breaking the speed limit, and inappropriate speed, driving too fast for the conditions, contribute to as many as one in three road deaths. Some groups argue that that overstates the significance of speed in road deaths. Other factors are involved in many deaths on our roads, but nothing is wrong in recognising the risk that speed represents and in acting to curb excess and inappropriate speed.

Enforcement has an obvious role. Why do we put up with such a lack of respect for speed limits? How can anyone complain when the police and highway authorities enforce the law effectively? Safety cameras, which detect vehicles that go through red traffic lights or exceed the legal speed limit, have contributed to reducing road casualties. In Staffordshire, fatal and serious injuries at speed camera sites reduced on average by a massive 60 per cent. in the three years after installation. The Government have sponsored a pilot scheme in six authorities—Staffordshire is sadly not one—whereby the speeding fines received are recycled into meeting some of the costs of installing and maintaining safety cameras. Early signs are that such a systematic deployment of cameras saves lives. Towards the end of the previous Parliament, we enacted the Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001, which permits the national rollout of that scheme.

Concern caused by more safety cameras is illustrated by some opponents' portrayal of the scheme as a stealth tax. We must answer the accusation if we want to carry public approval for the scheme, and there are three elements. First, the only people who pay speeding fines are those who break the law. Secondly, the siting of cameras must be seen to be for casualty reduction, not revenue raising. The Government must ensure that camera siting accords with published criteria relating to identifying casualty hotspots, the visibility of cameras

and related signage, and readily ascertainable speed limits. Thirdly, any recycled income should be additional to existing public spending on road safety.

It would also reassure the public if the Government kept the promise made by the then Minister of State at the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), in Standing Committee during the passage of the 2001 Act to provide regular reports to Parliament on the scheme's progress. The Government have a good story to tell to date on 20 mph zones, home zones and, still to come, quiet lanes in rural areas. A report on speed limits on rural roads, to which my hon. Friend the Minister referred, will be published later this year, as required by the Transport Act 2000.

I cannot leave the subject of speed management without mentioning traffic calming. It is a curious thing, as I learned once again during the recent election campaign, that residents cry out for traffic calming in their streets whereas motorists abhor the obstacle to their journey. I have thought about the problem for some time and have concluded that when local authorities start to draw up their local transport plans, they should engage their public in identifying strategic routes that should remain clear of humps, chicanes and the like and residential areas where traffic calming may, in conjunction with other speed management and casualty reduction policies, be justified.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Is my hon. Friend's experience different from mine? I have found that residents often cry out for traffic calming before it arrives, but when it does, many want to get rid of it because of increased fumes, noise, gear changing and other inconveniences. There are no new traffic-calming schemes in my area because they attract the ire of both motorists and residents.

Mr. Kidney: My experience is not quite the same. I receive grumbles from some residents in traffic-calming areas about additional noise, vibrations and fumes, but far more people are pleased about the schemes, which produce a visible reduction in speeds and a recordable reduction in casualties. In Staffordshire there remains a long list of requests, as yet unsatisfied, for new traffic-calming schemes.

Traffic calming is just one example of road engineering. We should not underestimate the contribution that attention to good design and road layout can make to reduce casualties on the roads. The AA Foundation produced an excellent policy document in 1999 entitled "What goes wrong in Highway Design...and how to put it right". I have a copy here. Its safety audit identified a series of commonly observed road safety problems for pedestrians, people with disabilities, cyclists, motor cyclists and vehicle users. As the title suggests, the document sets out some straightforward solutions.

Good road engineering solutions also featured in the PACTS-sponsored 11th Westminster lecture on transport safety last December. The lecturer was Dr. Rod Kimber, the director of science and engineering at the Transport Research Foundation. Some startlingly straightforward suggestions for road improvement were advanced, though Dr. Kimber's main message was that we must develop a coherent

[Mr. Kidney]

combination of approaches to tackle all three of the main challenges, which he listed as behaviour, roads and vehicles.

That brings me to the need to adopt a strategic approach to casualty reduction and to involve the local populace in the strategies. In Staffordshire the county council, as highway authority, approaches the challenge of reducing road casualties in partnership with other agencies, especially the police and the district councils. My hon. Friend the Minister provided a similar example of a partnership approach when he referred to Hertfordshire county council in the Adjournment debate on Tuesday. In Staffordshire the practical effect of the partnership is that everyone shares a clear commitment to reduce casualties.

I also happily support the PACTS' recommendations, not least because I had a hand in shaping them. The Government should ensure that road safety and road crimes are included in crime and disorder audits. Again, the value of doing so is that local communities can sign up to their commitment to casualty reduction.

In 1999 there were 870 pedestrian deaths and 172 cyclist deaths on the roads. I feel strongly that we should do more to keep walkers and cyclists safe. It is fair to say that they were here first, but during the 20th century, the explosion of powered vehicles has left the needs of those vulnerable groups overlooked. The promotion of safe routes to schools is a start and I commend authorities, such as Staffordshire county council, on their enthusiastic push. Come to Staffordshire, Mr. Winterton, and you will see that detailed attention has been paid to improving pedestrian facilities in the vicinity of schools, dedicated cycle ways to and from schools, and walking buses, which are organised, supervised group walks to and from school. It is worth making the point that creating safe routes to schools for walking and cycling benefits not only the environment but the health of those who participate.

The big, yellow school buses are already in use in Staffordshire. Parents like the feeling of safety that the journey to school by dedicated school bus gives. We have been at the forefront in pushing the Government to relax the two and three-mile walking distances laid down in the Education Act 1944. We want to offer more pupils the opportunity to travel to school safely aboard yellow school buses. Again, there is a double benefit: not only do pupils get to school safely but the school run of parents in cars is reduced and road congestion is eased.

The insurer Direct Line has been in touch with me about the usage of rear seat belts in cars. Apparently, this weekend will mark the 10th anniversary of the law that made such usage compulsory. The latest figures for compliance show that in December last year, only 59 per cent. of those travelling in the rear of cars wore seat belts. That contrasts with 94 per cent. usage of front seat belts. Direct Line is campaigning for the Government to narrow the gap between front and rear seat belt usage to less than 10 per cent. in the next five years and to eliminate it completely by 2011. I wish the campaign well. Anyone who has seen the latest hard-hitting television advertisements sponsored by the Government on the subject will have learned that 40 front seat passengers die each year as a result of being hit by an unrestrained rear seat passenger.

While dealing with other road users, I want to mention also the riders of powered two-wheel vehicles. They, too, are vulnerable road users. In 1999, 547 deaths were attributed to motor cycle use. It is instructive to listen to motor cyclists; they are acutely aware of the antics of other motorists. They see thoroughly reprehensible behaviour, including driving while eating, while using a mobile phone and while reading. Like other vulnerable road users, motor cyclists are at risk of death and serious injury because of the momentary inattention of other motorists.

That brings me to the tricky subject of driver quality. I passed my driving test when I was 18 years old. I do not think that I am unusual in having thrown away the highway code shortly afterwards. I have so far avoided the attention of the courts—touch wood—which can order that the test should be retaken as part of the sentence for some offences, and I have not made an insurance claim for some years. No one has suggested that I need refresher training. However, I undertook one training session with an advanced motorist, and I thoroughly approve of schemes such as Pass Plus and driver improvement for minor road traffic offending. Could we not do more to ensure that drivers and other road users are aware of their responsibilities as road users?

I remember the brief public information films on television in earlier years, particularly the one from more than 20 years ago about using the outside lane on motorways for overtaking only. With our crowded motorways today, that might be a slightly inappropriate message. Nevertheless, for 20 years the images from that advertisement have remained with me. Today, we see advertising campaigns from the Government on specific problems such as drinking and driving and wearing seat belts in the rear seats of cars, but we need a systematic campaign that is supported by all the relevant agencies: Government, local authorities, police, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, the Driving Standards Agency, driving instructors and insurers. The purpose of the campaign would be to win over road users to behaviour that demonstrates appreciation of risk, consideration of other road users and respect for the laws of the road.

Employers of workers whose job it is to drive have a particular responsibility to ensure that driving skills are honed and refreshed continually. Some employers have commendable driver training programmes, and some insurers and instructors offer excellent, cost-effective training packages. I urge the Government and the Health and Safety Commission not to lose sight of the potential benefits of a consistently high standard of driver training for workers who, because of the nature of their jobs, spend a great deal of time using the roads network.

Mr. Syms: On several occasions, the AA has raised the issue of the number of people who are driving without a licence. What the hon. Gentleman says about improving the standards of drivers with licences is perfectly appropriate, but many people out there should not be on the road.

Mr. Kidney: I entirely accept that. Another purpose of the Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001 is to allow a greater exchange of information between insurers, courts, the

police and the DVLA so that people who should not be on the road can be detected and identified. That is a good point, and a positive step has recently been taken to try to meet it.

As the hon. Gentleman said, driver quality can be impaired in many ways, including by the consumption of alcohol, the taking of both legal and illegal drugs, illness and drowsiness. I am grateful to the Loughborough sleep research centre for the information that driver sleepiness is believed to be a bigger killer on our roads than alcohol.

Some hon. Members will have seen a briefing paper prepared for this debate by PACTS, which raises issues that my hon. Friend the Minister should address. I shall pick out three for which I have some sympathy and ask him to comment on them. First, there have been news stories this week about the European Union caving in to the car manufacturing industry over standards of improvements to vehicle design. Reports allege that a proposed directive will be dropped in favour of a negotiated agreement that will bring at most 50 per cent. of the benefits of the directive. Where do the United Kingdom Government stand on that important issue?

Secondly, for some time the Government have been considering a proposal to reduce the maximum permitted blood alcohol level for drivers from 80 mg per 100 ml of blood to 50 mg. Does the Minister accept that that change would save lives and will the Government go ahead and make it?

Thirdly, following devolution, I asked the Government last year whether they would consider abandoning British summertime at least in respect of England and Wales. Sadly, they responded that that was a reserved matter, so the whole of the UK had to be considered, but no further answer came on the substantive point about British summertime. I know that factors beyond road safety would be involved in such a decision, but conclusions from the Transport Research Laboratory report show that more than 100 lives a year could be saved through acceptance of a new time regime. Will the Government at least consider making a change?

I believe that the Minister accepts that the trail of misery caused by road deaths is long and shameful and that he wants to contribute significantly to reducing the death toll. Likewise, I accept that the Government are intent on reducing the number of road casualties, with an especially determined effort to reduce child deaths and serious injuries. To that end, the Government must make full use of the levers at their disposal: education, enforcement and road engineering. In addition, they should never lose sight of the fourth "e": fully to evaluate the data to discern what works.

We all accept that the causes of such high levels of death and injury are many and complex and that the challenge of reducing road casualties is a mighty one. Let us resolve to work together to meet it and reach out to the many organisations and individuals outside this place who can help us. We must deliver a united, loud and clear message to all road users that we want them to complete their journeys in safety, for themselves and others. We cannot bring back to life those who have died, but we can assure their loved ones and our fellow citizens and road users that we mean to twist, turn, scrape and save to make our roads as free from death and injury as possible.

3.23 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I welcome the Minister to the Chamber. He may find that debates here are less controversial than those in the main Chamber. I, too, declare a non-pecuniary interest in that I am a member of Brake, an organisation that campaigns on road safety—incidentally, it is no relation. I thank Brake and other organisations such as PACTS and RoadPeace for the information that they have provided for this debate and at other times.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Bob Russell), whose Adjournment debate on the subject was a mine of information, some of which I may recycle today. My hon. Friend stated that there had been no Government debate on road safety since 1994, so this debate is most welcome, albeit overdue. As PACTS stated this month—after the Government document "Tomorrow's roads—safer for everyone" was published—despite the effect of road accidents on citizens in every part of society, transport and transport safety did not achieve the high priority that it deserved under the previous Government.

The Royal Automobile Club, too, is calling for action. It wants greater emphasis to be placed on investigations to determine the causes of road accidents so that lessons can be learned, and on the introduction of improved safety education and campaigns for all road users, including motorists, pedestrians, motor cyclists and cyclists.

We should not underestimate the damage done by road crashes. Although this country's record is good, road crashes are the biggest cause of death in males aged from 15 to 44 throughout the world. Even in the United Kingdom, there are a significant number of road deaths, at a cost of £1 million per fatality; there are smaller, but still significant, costs as a result of serious and minor injuries in road accidents.

The total cost to the NHS and other services is between £13 billion and £18 billion, depending on which organisation's briefing one relies on, the latter figure being the equivalent of 60p on income tax. That is not a factor that we should disregard, although I am pleased that our record is significantly better than many in Europe. An article in *The Guardian* today states that last year, 7,643 people died on roads in France, where 63 per cent. of people admitted to having driven under the influence of alcohol, which is a problem.

Although we have a good record, more could be done. More speed cameras could be introduced, as they are very effective at reducing speed, as every driver knows, even though the effect, unfortunately, is often temporary. When approaching a speed camera, one often notices that the car in front has slammed on its brakes to drop below the speed limit in the vicinity of the camera. Speed cameras are not anti-motorist; they are anti the inconsiderate, or, worse, the reckless, driver. More traffic-calming measures could be introduced. I find it difficult to understand the attitude of those, including at least one Member of Parliament, who consider traffic-calming measures to be impediments. I do not see it like that; I have small children and we live on a busy road. I appreciate that it is difficult for drivers to drive much faster than 20 mph up and down my street.

More measures for safeguarding pedestrians could be introduced, but I add a word of caution: they should be appropriate. The Select Committee on the

[Tom Brake]

Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs has been looking at walking in cities and towns, focusing on the use of cattle pens, which proliferate here but not on the continent. They do not always promote safe pedestrian use, and sometimes the opposite is true, as people avoid using them because it takes so much longer to cross a road when they cannot do so diagonally or in the direction that they want to go; they are forced to take a specific route if they go through the cattle pen. It is therefore important that only appropriate measures are introduced.

I support the introduction of safe cycle routes to schools and commend the work of my local authority, the London borough of Sutton, in that respect. I visited cycling proficiency schemes in the borough during the election campaign and saw hands-on training. The schemes involved going out on the roads, not just cycling in the safety of a school playground. Instructors highlighted the fact that there appeared to be no best practice guide that cycling proficiency instructors could draw on. They had to look at a number of different models adopted by authorities, and then produce their own. Perhaps the Minister will say that a best practice guide is, in fact, available to schools and local authorities.

We need to improve testing and training standards for drivers, but we must support standards that are meaningful and deliverable. I was lobbied by four or five motor cycle training organisations in my constituency about the recent introduction of the theory test. They are interested parties and not unbiased, but their view is that the theory test has added little to what is covered in the compulsory basic training test. We need to ensure that new measures are appropriate. If standards are improved—something that I support—the implications for organisations such as the Driving Standards Agency must be thought through. With the theory test, it was clear that the agency was unable to make the change, or that it was not prepared to do so, and that had a heavy impact on the motor cycle training companies in my area. They tried to book people for theory tests, but they were not available because the agency could not cope and had not thought through the implications of the change.

As part of the training process, we must improve standards for motor cyclists and cyclists. We must also improve the awareness of car drivers. I first got on a moped legally at the age of 14 when I lived in France—over there, mopeds can be driven from that age. Such experience enables people to develop a greater awareness of motor cyclists and cyclists so that when they become a car driver, they can appreciate how nerve-racking it is when a car skims past one foot away. We need to do something to make car drivers understand the implications of their driving habits and to increase their awareness of cyclists and motor cyclists. That awareness needs to be introduced in schools, and I welcome the Minister's response to the Adjournment debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester. The Minister stated that the Government

"are also looking for ways to work issues of safety into other lessons such as maths, physics and geography, where it can provide a link to the world outside through examples taken from real life." —[Official Report, 19 December 2000; Vol. 360, c. 339.]

Perhaps the Minister can give us a progress report on whether ideas for introducing safety into school lessons have been developed.

A key point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester is the need to change attitudes to practices such as belting up in the back seat. The Direct Line research has already been referred to. People accept that they must belt up in the front, but how can we make them accept that they must do so in the back? Direct Line estimates that in the period covered by its research 82 lives were lost as a result of failing to belt up in the back. Progress has been made and I welcome the "Tomorrow's roads: safer for everyone" report; as the Minister announced, there have been 9 per cent. fewer child deaths in the past year. I want to give him the opportunity to demonstrate that his fine words, and those of other Ministers, will be translated into a real reduction in the carnage on our roads.

I ask the Minister to break with what seems to be the tradition, in debates such as this, of Members asking questions that are never answered because time runs out. Often, even when questions are clearly and numerically set out, answers are still not forthcoming. With that in mind, I want to state on the record that I would like answers to each of the specific questions that I shall ask.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) referred to the report on rural roads that is due to be published by November 2001. The Minister said that good progress is being made on that report. Does such progress guarantee that it will indeed be delivered by November 2001? A request was made that regular updates be given in Parliament. During a Standing Committee debate on the Vehicles (Crime) Bill, a Home Office Minister said that regular progress reports would be issued on camera implementation and its effectiveness. What form will those reports take?

Reference has already been made to the European directive and I, too, seek clarification from the Minister as to the Government's view on that. Do they intend to support what appears to be a watered-down version of the directive: a voluntary agreement between manufacturers? If so, why are they willing to opt out of the estimated 20 per cent. reduction in deaths and serious injuries to which adoption of the directive would lead? Do the Government plan to support the implementation in rural areas of measures such as the Gloucester safer city initiative, so that we can get some hard data to work with?

I have just a few more questions for the Minister, to which I am sure he will respond in due course. Although it is not a matter for which the Government are directly responsible, have they undertaken an analysis of the number of additional police officers who might be employed on traffic-related duties following the budget increases that they announced? Would they support withdrawal of the charge of so-called careless driving, which fails adequately to reflect the impact of that offence? Would they support the introduction of an additional charge of serious injury by dangerous driving?

What plans, if any, do the Government have to enlarge the role of Victim Support following road accidents? Can funding be made available to Victim Support, so that it can play a bigger part?

The Minister said that he thought that the number of accidents involving pedestrians and cyclists might have declined because of certain improvements. Will he comment on the view that the number has declined not because of specific measures, but because the number of journeys made on foot or by bicycle has gone down? How will the Government reconcile their valuable targets to reduce injuries with their significant targets to increase the number of journeys by, for example, bike? Many people think that although both targets are worth while, they could work against each other.

The Minister will be pleased to hear that I have finished my list of questions. I hope that he will answer them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): Before I call the hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown), I should point out that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) has asked the Minister to reply to a large number of questions and has highlighted the quality of replies that he hopes to receive. If as many questions are asked by the remaining speakers, the Minister may be pushed to reply today. However, that is entirely in the hands of hon. Members.

3.40 pm

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Thank you for that warning, Mr. Winterton. I can relieve the Minister from any anxiety that he might have had because I do not have as many questions as the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake).

I am pleased to contribute to the debate because road safety is a crucial issue that is raised regularly by my constituents. Safety outside schools is the specific concern that is raised most frequently. Many parents want 20 mph zones to be set up outside schools, and there is a case for that being a general policy outside every school. The Minister referred to that issue in his introduction and I am sure that he will address it in his reply.

The Government's advice to local authorities—

Mr. McWalter: Is my hon. Friend aware that in America school buses display flashing lights when they are outside schools, and vehicles are not allowed to progress until the bus has emptied, so speed is effectively reduced to zero? Furthermore, it is a serious offence to bypass such a school. Might that not be a better idea?

Ms Drown: Well, that is one example of the lessons that we can learn from other countries.

The then Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions specifically advised local authorities to consider 20 mph zones, particularly around schools, in their local travel plans, but only where there was suitable traffic calming. I am concerned that that advice seems to hold up consideration of 20 mph zones outside schools, and I should be interested to see the extent to which that advice is evidence based. In my constituency we have some wonderfully effective signs outside schools. The signs, which were designed by children, say, "There is a school here. Slow down." That should wake up drivers on that road, who must realise—particularly around school time—that they should slow down and be aware of the

dangers. That would be a cheap and effective solution. However, some traffic-calming measures are expensive, which slows down the process of putting 20 mph zones outside schools.

The other issue raised in the Government's advice to local authorities on local travel plans concerned the effective use of speed cameras, which I shall discuss in a moment. Returning to traffic-calming measures, spending £20,000 outside each school in the country would be hugely expensive, but the cost would be small compared with the lives that would be saved. I should like to know the extent to which the Government have examined that issue.

Speed cameras would be an easy way of tackling road safety. Both Ministers and Back Benchers have argued that speed cameras should not be seen as revenue-raising schemes, which would be a concern if speed cameras were to go up outside every school, irrespective of local conditions. However, such schemes would be a reasonable way forward if they were part of saying to everyone, "Outside schools we slow down. There is no tolerance at all of speeding outside schools."

Concerned parents frequently ask me, "Does a child have to die on this road before we can get traffic calming or a speed camera here?" As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) said, the introduction of traffic calming must be considered logically and must be evidence-based. The areas that need the most help must be dealt with first. We can all understand why parents are frustrated and ask, "Does a child have to die first?" Their concerns should be an important criterion in our considerations.

The other measure that would help outside schools would be more crossing patrols. Schools in Swindon—for example, Robert Le Kyng school, which is on a main road quite near the centre of Swindon—face a real problem in recruiting crossing patrol staff. Even where there is a traffic patrol officer, there is often no one to take her place when she is off sick. On such a day, the local authority tries to inform the school and the police, but that is no comfort for parents who send their children off to school believing that there will be someone to help them to cross the road and hear the next day that there was no one. The solution might lie with the Prime Minister's volunteer scheme: more people could be encouraged to volunteer for the job. Although many companies might not want a member of staff regularly coming to work late because they are a school crossing patrol officer, surely almost every firm would say to an employee who volunteered, "I am happy for you to be the fill-in person when the local person is off sick." That could be their contribution to the community. Many parents who could not do the job would like to be able to be a back-up so that they would know that every day their child went to school they would have someone to cross the road with them.

Tom Brake: The hon. Lady might be interested in a suggestion that was made to me by a parent who was concerned about the absence of a school crossing patrol officer at her child's school. Having noted the regular presence of traffic wardens, she suggested that perhaps traffic wardens should have the scope of their duties enlarged to include school crossing patrols.

Ms Drown: That is a positive suggestion. I am afraid that in Swindon we have very few wardens—only one or

[Ms Drown]

two—so they would not stretch far. In time, we hope to get more in order to tackle our parking problems, which can also lead to road safety problems. However, I shall not go into that now.

Speeding is a major contribution to many road accidents. It is a tricky problem to sort out, and two angles need to be considered. First, driving fast is still seen as macho, a perception that we are starting to tackle, but we have a long way to go in comparison with the way in which society has shifted its attitudes to drink-driving during the past 20 or 30 years. Some of the worst drives that I experience take place when I am on my way to take part in television programmes. A lovely, comfortable car comes along, and I have all my work to prepare for the interview that I am going to, but I have to spend half my journey telling the driver, "You're speeding. Could we go slower? I'm sure we'll get to the studios in time." Nowadays, whenever someone asks me to appear on a television programme and offers me a driver, my dear staff have to say, "She'll have a driver, but only if you can guarantee that they won't speed on the roads." I am afraid that that even extends to former police officers who drive us around the country. That shows that it is an accepted form of behaviour that needs to be tackled.

Secondly, there is a difference between men and women drivers in this respect. The AA carried out a survey examining the different techniques of men and women drivers, which revealed that women had a higher proportion of their accidents at junctions, but men had a higher proportion of accidents on bends, when overtaking and during the hours of darkness. Men adopt faster speeds than women, have a higher fatality risk and commit more driving and speeding violations. They are more likely to drink and drive or take illegal drugs and drive, and are prepared to drive for longer periods than women. If we could get rid of some of those different attitudes to driving, we might move forward.

In his introduction, the Minister mentioned car design and car safety design. We should look at that. Why do speedometers go up to 160 mph? It is absolutely crazy. That tempts people with a new car, on a quiet day, to see just how fast they can go. That is a part of society's attitude that needs changing. I know that we should tackle the problem with other European countries, but the Environmental Transport Association has been saying for a number of years that there is no justification in speedometers that go way over any nationally recognised speed limits. I hope that the Minister will take that matter up with his colleagues.

I have mentioned the macho element in speeding. Another element, which affects everybody, is that driving is such a day-to-day occurrence that it is easy for people to feel comfortable, relaxed and slack about it rather than thinking that they are about to get into a lethal instrument. For some age groups, it is the most likely place in which people will die or be involved in an accident in which someone else will die or be severely injured. The more we can remind ourselves and others of that, the more we will realise the necessity of taking every precaution, just as people do when they are doing other potentially dangerous things.

I have said a little about speed cameras, and the pilot schemes that have allowed local authorities the income from speed cameras have been mentioned. They have been incredibly effective in reducing accidents. In six pilot areas, after just six months, casualties were down by 34 per cent. and speeds by 53 per cent. If such results could be replicated throughout the country, we could see this not as a revenue-making exercise, but an attempt to move to the viewpoint—as has happened with drink driving—that speeding is not acceptable. We should be progressing in that way.

Hon. Members have mentioned the review of speed limits. The Minister said that the AA and others have said that such a review must be done in consultation with drivers. Of course that is right, but the views of pedestrians, cyclists and the families of victims who have died as a result of speeding vehicles should be listened to just as much.

I have three final points. First, there have been reports in this Chamber today about local acceptance of traffic-calming. In my area, many people have called for traffic-calming measures. There have been some complaints and mistakes are sometimes made in the way in which traffic-calming measures are carried out, but I have seen a general acceptance of the need for traffic calming. It is the results of traffic calming in Swindon that have made the greatest impression on me. Speed has been massively reduced and there has been a reduction in accidents—powerful results that show how worth while the measures are.

Secondly, I should like to ask the Minister about the impact on road safety of different vehicles using bus lanes. In Swindon, buses and cyclists use bus lanes but taxis and motor cyclists do not. Both of those groups have campaigned to use bus lanes, and the council is reviewing that. Is there any national information on the impact on road safety of allowing those groups to use bus lanes?

My final point is about road maintenance. It is always seen as boring because it just goes on, year after year, but it can have a big impact on road safety. It is especially important for cyclists and motor cyclists. We have all seen those potholes, and we have all seen cyclists topple over because roads are not maintained. Cars are affected, too. I am delighted that the Government have massively increased the amount spent on road maintenance. In Swindon, up to 10 times the budget provided by the Conservative Government has sometimes been allowed for road maintenance under this Government, but there is still a lot to do. The backlog for road maintenance is huge, and that affects road safety. I am especially worried when people talk about building loads more roads. We should proceed carefully in building more roads when road maintenance is insufficient for the existing ones. I hope that that will always be borne in mind in considering future schemes.

I am delighted that we are having this debate. It shows that the Government are making road safety a priority. We need to keep that priority. Too many people are dying, especially children. Swindon people, and Swindon parents in particular, will back the Government's initiative to tackle the problem. I am delighted with it, and I look forward to working with the Government over the years to come to reduce fatalities and injuries on our roads.

3.56 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I welcome you, Mr. Winterton, to the Chair. I am sure that it will not be long before you are reappointed as a Deputy Speaker. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Minister. I am sure that we shall have many debates in the wonderful surroundings of Westminster Hall, as well as on the Floor of the House.

Following the debate initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) on Tuesday, I shall not make too many points. The matter is not controversial. No one present would argue that we do not need road safety, that everything is hunky dory and that there is no cause for concern.

Hon. Members, and in particular my hon. Friends, mentioned the importance of having this debate now. It is always worth bearing in mind that, up to the age of 18—I use the fact sparingly—the likelihood of dying in a road accident is much greater than the likelihood of dying in any other way. When I hear about attacks and other things that can happen to our children, I try to remind people that the most likely way in which a child will die is either in a car crash or, more likely, by being knocked down by a car. That is a salutary lesson that we must always recall.

I start with a couple of points that I am not sure have been covered; if they have, I emphasise my own position. The idea that there is an urban road safety issue and a rural one, and that they are different, is a false dichotomy and involves false conclusions. The vast majority of motorists drive between urban centres for much of their motoring, and even in urban centres people encounter different conditions, some of which, although they are not rural, involve different traffic speeds, for example. I should like to nail the lie that motorists drive in different ways and that that leads to different road safety problems.

I welcome the production of the Government's rural road hierarchy, whenever that may be. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) asked for a definite date. I do not believe that it can come too soon, because, although urban casualties have declined, there has been a blip upwards in rural road casualties. We all know why: people tend to substitute what they consider to be slower routes in more urban parts by going through more rural rat runs, which can lead to accidents. That is certainly true in my area.

Hon. Members have already discussed many of the issues that I wanted to cover, such as safer routes to schools, and home zones. In common with my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown), I ask the Minister for further clarification, particularly regarding local authorities and the prioritising of home zones. Local authorities must fully understand the procedures and act on them as expeditiously as possible. As always there is some confusion, which often, unfortunately, leads to delay. Advice and information should be exchanged between central and local government.

Other hon. Members have dealt with cyclists and pedestrians. We are all pedestrians and most of us are cyclists. I am a keen cyclist and often cycle around my constituency, despite its hills. It would be good to have many more cycle ways, but one feels relatively safe. Nine out of 10 drivers are patient and understanding towards

cyclists. I shall not comment on the one in 10, but anyone who has cycled will have experienced them. The problem is that people who do not cycle forget what it is like to be on a bike. Maintaining distance and being able to cut in front of a cyclist are important to drivers, but cyclists find it most annoying to be cut up by a car on the brow of a hill. Occasional re-education of motorists in the experience of using one's own power to travel around would not go amiss.

We have a good record on cycle training for younger people. It does not have to be for young people, but we tend to concentrate on them because we can easily gain access to them through the school system, and our efforts are important. Only about 18 per cent. of cyclists wear helmets, yet the chances of surviving a crash are vastly improved by wearing one, which is why it was made compulsory for motor cyclists. We should look into the possibility of giving out helmets at school. It may be costly and it may not be de rigueur to wear a helmet, but everyone should wear one on a bicycle.

My hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw), who is now a member of the Government, introduced a Bill on the compulsory addition of bells to bikes. I cannot recall what happened, but it did not become a key part of the Government's legislative programme during the previous Session and it did not feature in the Labour party's manifesto this year. I trust that he will pursue the policy, albeit from a more distant position than in the past.

Mr. Kidney: Just to help my hon. Friend, I recall that towards the end of the previous Parliament, the Deputy Prime Minister made an announcement about the compulsory fitting bells on new bicycles.

Mr. Drew: I am not sure how to answer that, but I am pleased to hear it.

I am pleased that we have a strategy for pedestrians. It is sometimes viewed as bizarre, but there are important reasons why we are always in the game of education. A couple of weeks ago, during road safety week, I visited Little Angels, one of my nurseries and pre-school units, in Eastington, not far from where I live. It was good to see the children being trained to cross the road. I was involved in the role play and my foot was driven over more than once by a tiny car. Education is not discrete: it is an on-going process. We must ensure that all road users understand the need to be tolerant, not only of similar users—car drivers being tolerant of other car drivers—but of different types of user.

I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Minister came to Gloucester; I will invite him to Stroud so that he can see the other side of things. From the objective evidence of the letter columns of the local paper, I can say that there is no more popular subject than the safer city project. Most of the letters are very critical, seeing those responsible for the project as nothing less than fascists who are removing people's right to drive in whatever direction they want at the speed they think appropriate. The critics view all the impositions as unfair. I occasionally feel hot under the collar and want to respond to them, but I have to bite my tongue because the project is not in my constituency and is not directly my responsibility, although many of my constituents drive through the wonderful streets of Gloucester. There

[Mr. Drew]

is a view—I am sure that it is a minority one and hope that it is held by a tiny minority—that all the money spent on the project is wasted and that much more could be done with it. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon said, our roads need resurfacing. We need to ensure that people understand what we are doing and why, and that there would be many more casualties if we did not do it. Again, the issue is important and we must keep banging on about it.

Will my hon. Friend the Minister comment on progress on seat belts on coaches? There is a timetable for their installation, and it cannot be implemented a moment too soon because there is a need to ensure the proper protection of school children travelling on coaches. There has been disagreement with some of the safety organisations about what type of seat belt should be fitted. I have in my constituency an active campaigner who is not totally happy with our achievement—which I think is a good one—of making the fitting of seat belts on new coaches compulsory. On the general safety of coaches, when the police or traffic engineers do a purge, it is worrying how many coaches dismally fail the road safety requirements.

Hon. Members have covered the issue of motor cycling and they have been fair. We must try to strike the right balance between encouraging people to use that important alternative to the car, and laying down safety requirements for motor cyclists. On drink-driving, a handful of constituents have come to me who, as part of the requirement of getting back a licence, have to undergo a medical test; they are, to use the term used earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) heavy drinkers. In two of the cases I dealt with it was unclear why they were being asked for a test. Perhaps those people were not telling me the whole truth, but it is important that we have clear criteria for when a medical test is required to get a licence back.

The safety strategy mentions the difficult issue of older drivers. I have a vested interest here, because I persuaded my father to give up driving at the age of 88 four years ago, although he saw himself as a pretty safe motorist and did not have a terribly bad record. One of my local GPs said that he was very concerned when older motorists asked him to give a statement that they were safe to drive. He is unclear about the degree of knowledge that he is expected to demand from an older driver and, more particularly, about whether he is taking a risk, so we need to look into that.

I have a mini-question about illegal taxi-ing, which has not been mentioned so far, but is certainly a problem in my area and not unknown in London. There seems to be a growth industry involving people who turn their cars into taxis on Friday nights and take enormous risks. Unfortunately, other people take those risks with them, and we should perhaps consider that aspect of road safety.

I welcome the chance to take part in the debate. I said that I would mention the safety Bill, which I presume will relate largely to rail safety and may include air safety. I hope that it will consolidate road safety measures, because there is a need for that. We must ensure that we know what else needs to be done.

The use of hand-held mobile phones in cars has been mentioned, and I am not sure what the legal position is. Some people have been satisfactorily prosecuted, but that is not having the desired impact. People on bikes or in cars at roundabouts increasingly have difficulty in judging whether drivers have seen them, because they are more interested in receiving a telephone call than in driving their cars. We need therefore to tighten up legislation if we are to have our place in the sun.

4.12 pm

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): I shall dwell mainly on the issue of cameras this afternoon, because I think that there is deep uncertainty in the Government's mind about their use, and I believe that they could support a road safety strategy. I am particularly interested in hidden cameras and those that link to computerised systems for the gathering of information about where vehicles are. Among other things, they allow us to check whether some vehicles should be on the road, on the basis that information picked up by a camera sometimes requires the police to be alerted.

Cameras are the most important of the road safety devices available to us. Although people often talk about the cost of installing a camera, they say too little about the benefits of such an installation. At least one contribution this afternoon has characterised my position on traffic calming as not very positive. In fact, Hemel Hempstead has a mature traffic-calming system involving about 50 roads. It is interesting that there are about 20 different designs for traffic calming. That is partly because every time a road is affected, its residents complain bitterly, so another style of traffic calming is tried the next time.

I shall give two examples, which show why it would have been better not to introduce traffic-calming measures. The village of Nettleden in my constituency was cut in half by speeding vehicles, so something had to be done. A pinch point was put at each end of the hamlet, so vehicles have to move over at the beginning of the system so that they can drive through the village. That sounds as though it will make the cars go slower, but in the mornings nearly everyone is going south and in the evenings they are going north, so there is not much traffic in the opposite direction. When vehicles arrive at one pinch point and see, 150 yd away, that the other is clear, they promptly step on the gas to try to get through it, in case there is a vehicle coming round the corner a bit further on which will then approach the chicane. The measures have made virtually no difference, and five cameras could have been installed for the same cost.

There should be a hidden camera in Nettleden to record the speed of cars so that drivers who travel faster than the 30 mph limit can be prosecuted. However, in an old village where the houses are right on the road, even the 30 mph limit is too high when children might come straight out of their front doors and on to the road. Like other hon. Members, I believe that the limit would more suitably be set at 20 mph. Just up the road from Nettleden is a road on which cars are driven at absurd speeds. There should be no motor vehicles on that road at all, let alone fast cars, so that bicycles and pedestrians can have the joy of it.

That raises a question about ownership of the roads, which are not only for motorists. Other people may have rights that have been given far too little consideration.

All over the country there are vehicles travelling towards a collision at 120 mph. One of the Government's research papers, which was commissioned for the speeding review carried out in March 2000, stated that having a speed limit of 60 mph on a single carriageway road was as appropriate as continuing with open sewerage systems in the middle of the road. But it is far healthier than that; the general speed limit of 60 mph on single carriageway roads is obscene. I do not say that there are not some roads where it is appropriate—I can think of some in Lincolnshire, for example, where there is a clear sightline for many miles. However, local motor cyclists traverse those roads at nearer 120 mph because they are great places for a burn-up; there is little enforcement and there are no cameras. Those roads have some of the highest death rates on single carriageway roads in the country.

The issue is what measures we believe are appropriate. A report by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions states that there are four different categories of response to cameras, and people who slow down just as they go past and speed up afterwards are in the third category, called "manipulators". That was matched only by the category called "defiers", who took no notice of the cameras whatever. Visible cameras play a major role, but not in altering standard driver behaviour. Driver behaviour alters in the proximity of the camera. That is not the case for all drivers, but it is enough to lower speeds at a 50 mph camera by as much as 5 or 6 mph.

Hidden cameras are important. They could be much more effective in ensuring that motorists travel at the speed that is deemed to be safe. At the moment we assume that if we have a limit of 20 mph, everyone will whistle through at 32 mph anyway. I do not see why we should permit that. Motorists have the right to know that there are hidden cameras, but often they do not know where they are. We could have a signposting system. In my Adjournment debate on Tuesday, I suggested a speed limit sign with a double red ring around it to denote strict enforcement of the limit, possibly or probably with a hidden camera. That would have some effect on speed.

Ms Drown: Is my hon. Friend aware of the research done on the Nottingham pilot which showed that digital cameras have effectively eliminated speeding in the areas in which they are used because they catch every driver? Drivers get to know that they simply cannot speed there.

Mr. McWalter: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I am aware of that. I am also aware of the Norfolk experiment in which the signs are sensitive to the speed of the car. At the moment they simply tell the car as it approaches to slow down. Those signs are not linked to anything else and will not result in a prosecution, yet they are effective because drivers do not want to be embarrassed in front of other drivers by having a sign flashing at them. Again, as with many of these measures, the tolerance level is set very high. The police take the view that otherwise the sign would flash so often that people would ignore it completely. It is a difficult balancing act.

Such devices could be extremely powerful weapons. The trouble is that the Government still lack the will to take action. I will be interested to hear what my hon.

Friend the Minister has to say about that. Perhaps I should intervene on myself here. I welcome my hon. Friend to the Front Bench. I forgot to do so during my Adjournment debate because I was rather short of time, and I hope that he will accept my welcome now. I also thank him for the spirited way in which he set about his duties.

It is difficult for the Government to find the will to take action because they do not want to be seen as being against the motorist, and they have good reasons for taking that view. I note what my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) says about the differences between the sexes in their attitudes to motor vehicles. Most members of the male sex are extremely interested in motor vehicles in a way that is often just short of, and sometimes even greater than, love. The car is a fantastic invention. It is a tremendous testimony to human creative, imaginative and engineering powers. Just to appreciate vehicles is perfectly natural, and people's desire to enjoy their vehicle and motoring is an important part of their general attitude to vehicles.

Through the all-party motor cycle group, I have been involved in trying to promote GCSE and more advanced examinations in motor vehicles and road user studies, which is available as a GCSE in Northern Ireland but not in the rest of the United Kingdom. The approach should be generalised because it is important for young people to develop an understanding of motor vehicles, what they can do and their limitations, and the circumstances that give rise to danger. That echoes some of the comments of the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake). Included in the syllabus is the field examination of road configurations to assess the extent to which they pose danger and threat. That allows young people who learn about motor vehicles to see the relationship between their driving and the road in a more constructive way. Other parts of the paper deal with the law and other matters.

I want to see such education as part of our general shift. I have put that already to the Department for Education and Skills, asking for specialist schools with dedicated facilities for familiarising people with motor vehicles before they become motorists. I have so far had an interesting response.

Mr. Drew: I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that there are courses about car crime. However, the basic problem is that there is no parallel elsewhere and that many people see driving as a right rather than a privilege. Unless we return to the idea that it is a privilege, many of the problems that he has talked about will continue.

Mr. McWalter: I hear what my hon. Friend says but the difficulty is that driving is a necessity in many areas, so it must be a right. Many people live in villages that are cut off from the outside world because they do not have a bus or train service. If they did not have access to vehicles, their life prospects and available choices would be so significantly reduced that it would be hard to see how some communities could subsist. Although I understand his comments, I believe that there are two elements. First, the motor vehicle is a fantastic testimony to human creativity, which we rightly admire—especially those of us who are interested in

[Mr. McWalter]

engineering sciences. Secondly, the car is a necessity, albeit a dangerous one. We must deal with the subject on that basis.

If the Government have no plans to reduce the 60 mph speed limit on single carriageways, why not? Why was there no specific mention of hidden cameras in the speeding document? I have checked carefully with the Ministers concerned on that point, and it is because the Government do not want to be seen as anti-motorist, as they would be if they introduced a whole raft of regulations, perhaps taking the advice of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) and significantly reducing the blood alcohol limit so that people could have only half a glass of wine with dinner, for example, or lowering speed limits dramatically. As I have said to my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon, there is no reason in principle why the speed limit for some road situations should not be zero.

One great safety invention was based on the view that there are road situations in which it is appropriate for the speed limit to be zero. That invention was the work of Leslie Hore-Belisha in the 1930s, who said that drivers could not as of right cross a piece of road identified by an orange globe and black and white markings on the road. Anyone near that piece of road had the right to cross it before the driver, who had to stop. That philosophy is very interesting. We replaced Belisha beacons and zebra crossings with a system of pelican crossings, in which vehicles may proceed but, for 17 or 18 seconds, must give priority to somebody else. The pedestrian must start off and get across while the indicator is beeping, and at the end of that time, the road becomes the motorist's again. We must remember Belisha's courageous and exciting approach, and we should generalise it.

I am not wildly impressed when people talk to me about a 20 mph limit for home zones, because the chances of serious injury to a child who is hit at 20 mph are substantial indeed. If we took a more Belisha-like approach to home zones, we would say, "Hang on a minute, these are places where children play." Children come out through a front door with a ball and kick it around, and mothers can watch them from a window. Perhaps a car goes by occasionally. Church road in Flamstead in my constituency is a nice little road, and it is perfectly reasonable for children to play on it. A car should travel at no more than 5 mph on it. It should be clearly understood that it is a road in which children are in charge.

At the moment, it is difficult for us to incorporate such a philosophy. Throughout Hertfordshire, which has been proactive about road safety partnerships, roads are painted red. There is elaborate signing and there are pinch points, humps and everything else. The result is confusion for people in the locality. They no longer know what they are meant to do. There is still a prevailing philosophy that the road is for the motorist, albeit for a motorist who is the equivalent of a runner who has had his right leg kicked in so that he has to hobble rather than run. To start with, we need an understanding that some roads are not for the motorist. If their primary use is for children's play, let that be clear, limit the speed to 5 mph, and install a camera to

ensure that people honour the limit and do not zoom around at 15 mph. Let us be clear about what those roads are for.

I did not take much pleasure in hearing the Minister say that cycle injuries have decreased, because I believe that the reason is that cyclists have been terrified off the roads by vehicles converging at 60 mph from the north and 60 mph from the south. Sandwich cycling is not appealing. I am now unable to use my bicycle on country lanes. I sometimes cycle to my local paper shop, which is not down a country lane, but I am denied a proper, decent bike ride because that road is completely dominated by the motorist.

On a standard country lane, 45 mph is probably appropriate, and I do not know of any reason why there should not be a lower limit at hazards. If 45 mph is appropriate on the nice, straight bit where the driver can see exactly what is ahead, there is no reason why there should not be a speed limit for going round a corner. If a bend sign can be put on a road, a sign can be put underneath not to advise but to instruct people to go round it at 25 mph. There could be a hidden camera to ensure that if they go above 25 mph, they risk prosecution. That is very important, and if it happened, I could return to the country roads near my house on my bicycle. I could take out my seven-year-old daughter, who has never been on the road, on her bicycle, rather than be terrified by motorists who go along that road as if it were a motorway, particularly during rush hour.

The Government have been unwilling to confront those issues because they do not want to come across as being an enemy of the motorist, which I can understand and, to an extent, sympathise with. However, it is important for us to be imaginative about how we can meet motorists' demands more reasonably. If we ask people to do 5 mph here, 20 mph there, and 45 mph where previously they went at 60 mph, and we strictly enforce that with hidden cameras, we shall lose many people from the road, including some for whom a car is a necessity.

We are also responding to the motorists' agenda. One way in which we can do that is by thinking again about the speed limit on motorways. At present, 4 per cent. of deaths are caused on motorways and 54 per cent. on single carriageway roads where the bedlam speed is still the limit. There is no argument about which roads are the safest. Consider, first, a car proceeding along a road at 60 mph with another car coming at 60 mph in the other direction, as happens on many single carriageway roads. They will pass each other within a matter of a yard. If anything goes wrong, such as a tyre blow-out, there will be a crash with a collision speed of 120 mph, or if they are both going round a corner in a country lane at 45 mph, a crash at 90 mph. It is unlikely that anyone will emerge alive from such a collision.

Secondly, consider a car going along a motorway at 120 mph. It has an intelligent speed assessment unit fitted in it that sends a signal to a global positioning satellite. If that car gets too close to the car in front, it will be automatically slowed to a speed consistent with stopping safely by a signal to the engine management system. Some would call that scenario science fiction, but we already have the technology and some trial vehicles.

Other things being equal, there is no reason why the Government should not announce in principle that they would be happy to see an increase in the speed limit under the appropriate circumstances given that the current limit is disobeyed at any given time by 55 per cent. of motorists, and periodically by a larger percentage than that. The current limits bring the law into disrepute in the sense that most people do not believe that it is sensible or feasible to obey them. We could keep the current limit, but announce that we are willing to consider increasing it subject to conditions such as strict compliance with whatever new limit we decide and new technology.

The Minister mentioned on Tuesday that tyre noise on urban motorways was a problem. We, therefore, need a limit that reflects the current state of motorway road surfaces and tyre technology. They must be factored into whatever limit applies. The Government could send out a signal to the motorist by saying, "We are thinking about those of you who enjoy your car and want to use it safely at faster speeds, and we would like to meet your demand if we possibly can." That would lead to a much greater willingness on the part of the motorist to comply with the harsher regime that I envisage should be introduced for children's play spaces, roads with cyclist and equestrian priority and rural roads policed by hidden cameras.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): I thought that my hon. Friend was speaking with the voice of sweet reason—until he advanced the last part of his argument. Those Members who have been involved in transport safety for a very long time have always felt that speed is one of the greatest dangers. Every time the speed limit is raised, people travel that much faster than the new limit. If a limit is raised to 80 mph, they travel at 90 or 95 mph, and so on. The 55 mph limit that was established in the United States led to a win-win situation all round. It proved environmentally better for this fragile earth and reduced road deaths substantially. I advise my hon. Friend against relinquishing the fight against motorway speeding. We must be very cautious—

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): Order. I frown upon over-lengthy interventions.

Mr. McWalter: I hear what my esteemed colleague says, but because the Government have not wanted to appear to be anti-motorist and because nearly all the measures associated with an improved safety regime appear anti-motorist, many good things that should be done have not been done. I am simply asking whether there is a way in which motorists' aspirations to enjoy motoring at speeds that sometimes exceed our current limits can be factored into encouraging the responsible use of vehicles in all circumstances.

One can think solely about safety. One can regard cars simply as objects that pollute the planet. There are ways of approaching the subject that could lead to a very repressive regime indeed. The Government's own publication on speeding states that there is a trade-off between those factors. It quickly dismisses the idea of increasing the motorway speed limit, but the issue is whether we can develop an overall package that will gain people's respect. There is no computer model available from PACTS, for example, that shows how we

can change people's mentality so that they will understand that it is vital to drive at no more than 5 mph down Church road, Flamstead. Such thinking might be more achievable through my approach than through a 20-point package, every single one of which appears to have been designed by those who think that cars are polluting and dangerous, and that their use is best minimised.

I want us to send the right signal, and I am doing that in part through my recommendations in respect of the study of motor vehicles. In Great Britain, at least, one can study vehicle engineering at graduate and post-graduate level, but not at GCSE or A-level. We must make it clear that we understand and are responding to the problem, and that we would be willing to agree to a trade-off, as it were, in the appropriate circumstances.

Like my hon. Friend, I am interested in lowering the average actual speed of vehicles on the road. Let me make it clear that I very much want to see that happen. To give a random example, if there were a strict limit of 80 mph on the motorway as opposed to the current, widely disobeyed limit of 70 mph, I do not think that the average speed would go up. It might possibly go down. We would certainly not be seeing a law ignored by almost everybody subject to it, so brought into disrepute. Such a situation is not sensible.

It is perfectly consistent to say that overall speeds can be lowered within a varied package. My points do not apply only to motorway speed limits. A road in my constituency has an advisory speed of 35 mph. It is not a strict speed limit. It is a very sensible speed in snow or sleet, or when strong sunshine has followed a downfall of rain, but otherwise it is ludicrously low. It is a little bit of road that leads to the M1, and anyone going round it at 35 mph would be shunted up the back by a 20-tonne or 38-tonne truck. It would be dangerous to go round it at that speed.

The problem is that local authorities are so keen on caution that they set limits that even the most responsible of motorists finds unreasonable. Once that happens, people get used to the idea that if the limit is 70 mph, they can add 10 per cent. to make 77 mph and then a couple for luck, to give 79 mph. Then they think, "As long as I'm doing 79, they won't do anything to me. At 80 they might pull me in if they're being narky, but otherwise they won't."

An awful lot of motorists are making such calculations, even on roads with 30 mph limits. They add 10 per cent. to make 33 mph and a couple more for luck, which is 35 mph. We have worked out that there are many, many roads in Britain with a 30 mph limit where serious or mortal injury is likely. My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon has been very eloquent about the problem outside our country's schools, where it is ludicrous to have a speed limit of 30 mph.

Another example will illustrate even more clearly that speeds much lower than 30 mph are dangerous. *[Interruption.]* I am in your hands, Mr. Winterton. Is the debate due to end at half-past five?

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): Indeed it is. I was becoming slightly concerned that the Minister might not have the opportunity to reply. The hon.

[in the Chair]

Gentleman has spoken for nearly 35 minutes, which is the longest speech this afternoon. I hope that he might draw his remarks to an end.

Mr. McWalter: I am sorry. I have outrun my time, so I will not describe another traffic-calming experiment in my constituency that has nearly resulted in children being killed every morning. I hope that I have given the Minister not a farrago of questions, but some thoughts that he might develop.

4.49 pm

Mr. Jamieson: With permission, Mr. Winterton, I shall endeavour to reply to what has been a full debate.

I said at the beginning that I was looking forward to hon. Members' contributions, and I have enjoyed listening to the deep concern and thoughtful insights that so many of them have.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter), with whom I had the pleasure of debating on Tuesday night, mentioned Belisha crossings. He may or may not know that one of my predecessors in Plymouth, Devonport was the same Hore-Belisha, a Minister of Transport in the 1930s who later filled other Government posts. Apparently he was well known, in the late July-August period, for going out and doing a bit of what we nowadays call showboating to get himself into the press, which was not much known in those days. I do not know whether I will be able to emulate some of those aspects of his contribution to road safety. Despite being a Liberal, he was an extremely thoughtful, intelligent and able man who thought carefully about these issues.

One of the overriding themes that emerged in the debate, especially in the helpful and thoughtful comments of my hon. Friend, was the need for us to change the culture of the way in which people think about driving and using the roads. It is not just a matter of enforcing laws. I am reminded of my days in higher education back in the 1960s. I well recall the debates in the junior common room, one of which was on the motion, "This house believes that the drink-driving laws are an affront to individual liberty." I was struck by the passion with which people said that they should have the individual liberty to drink as much alcohol as they wanted to and then to drive their car or motor bike. We had similar debates about seat belts, in which people said, "How dare Big Brother Government or the nanny state tell people whether they should wear seat belts." If one met those same people today and presented them with the same arguments, very few would say that it is socially acceptable to drink and drive. People's attitudes are changing, as my hon. Friend said, but we must still challenge some of their attitudes towards speeding, road use and the consideration that we show to one another.

I shall endeavour to respond to as many points as possible. That is a formidable task, but I shall try in some small measure to be equal to it. Sadly, the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) could not stay for the rest of the debate; I believe that he is driving carefully back to his constituency as we speak. I appreciated his kind welcoming of me to my post and his consensual approach to road safety. It is important to find that

consensual approach. He referred to road safety in the context of the Tory party's "recent very popular manifesto". I wonder what would have happened to the Conservative party had its manifesto been unpopular. Perhaps the new leader will be reflecting on that in the coming months and years.

The hon. Gentleman introduced the concept of a road casualty investigation branch and how it might work. There are some difficulties with that. Many of the problems that we have discussed are local problems, and the solutions need to be owned largely by people in their own localities. As was said during the debate on Tuesday night, there are often local solutions to local problems. The other difficulty with his idea is that it could duplicate the work of other bodies such as the Commission for Integrated Transport, the Audit Commission and the best value regime. Creating a roads inspectorate could be a major distraction from other priorities in the 10-year plan.

The hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members mentioned drink-driving. The main issue is that we must drive down hard on the small hard core of people who would still support that motion from the 1960s and who still think that drink-driving is acceptable. They are a hard core who put other road users at risk, whether it be pedestrians or car drivers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) gave a passionate and quietly compelling speech today. He made effective comparisons between the death and injury rates of different modes of transport. Anything we do regarding road safety must not distract us from safety in other areas, such as rail and air. When accidents happen on rail, in the air, or at sea, they can be catastrophic events, which cause considerable public concern.

My hon. Friend referred to the cross-party approach of successive Governments, and we must all recognise that. Over a long period, there has been a reduction in road incidents coupled with a massive increase in road use. He talked about traffic calming in the context of finding engineering solutions to problems. I am attracted to such ideas, in general, because they do not involve enforcement, which is often expensive and can be distracting for the police when enforcing the law in other areas. He was intervened on by my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, who said that people in his area objected to some of the traffic-calming schemes and engineering solutions. However, the real test of such schemes is how much they improve road safety and contribute to a safer environment. There will be objections, but generally they will not come from the people living in the area who, along with their children, have been put at risk.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford also referred to school buses. In Toronto, I saw the effect when a yellow school bus turned on all its lights on an eight-lane highway. Every other vehicle came to a standstill, under the threat—I believe—of imprisonment, and of having a licence withdrawn if the bus's signal was ignored. To see two or three small children walk across that urban motorway in total safety was a compelling sight. That idea is attractive and the Government are examining the use of school buses. Perhaps we can gain something from the experience in the United States and Canada.

My hon. Friend also mentioned rear seat belts, as have other hon. Members. The campaign, which the Department undertook last year, used an advertisement showing a teenage boy in the back seat, and talked about his mother meeting her killer. It turned out that the son, who was not belted in, was the killer. That had a considerable impact on the public. Sometimes such advertisements are shocking, but perhaps we need that on occasion. It had a profound effect on me—I have fairly grown-up children and I reflected on the issue very carefully. It was an effective campaign. In the European Union we are considering tightening rules for seat belt use by children in all vehicles. Announcements will be made in the not too distant future.

My hon. Friend also mentioned a driving test for older people. I trembled for a moment because I had heard that those over 50 might have to take a re-test. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) nods—he is somewhat younger than me. The evidence shows that older, more mature drivers are far safer on the roads, and insurance policies reflect that. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), who has a fine record on road safety, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead and I would have something to say if a new regime were introduced for the over-50s, and we would want to be assured that it was a major contributor to road safety. I have yet to be convinced of those arguments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford mentioned summer time. If I stray too deeply into that, I may exceed my brief, but some evidence supports his comments about road accidents occurring at certain times of year and about how darkness, especially in relation to children travelling to school, affects road safety.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) welcomed the debate. He made several interesting points. He mentioned cameras and how they can contribute to slowing people down and, like others, mentioned people driving towards the camera, slowing down and then speeding up. Cameras are often placed in blackspots, and even if people do that, the cameras contribute to road safety. Feedback on the Gloucester scheme, which the hon. Gentleman may not have had an opportunity to read, contains details of experiments in which an average speed was taken over a length of road. A camera takes an image of a number plate, records the speed at the beginning and end of a journey along a piece of road, and calculates the average speed. That is intelligent thinking, as in such circumstances people cannot get away with slowing only in a particular part. They can get away with driving faster and stopping just before the next light, but I do not believe that many people would choose that option if they were in a hurry to reach their destination.

The hon. Gentleman discussed traffic calming, which he said some people consider an impediment to driving. I am sure that he would agree that traffic calming is generally an impediment to dangerous driving. The hon. Gentleman also discussed cycling and asked whether schools receive any best practice guidance. Key stage 3 curriculum guidance on children's personal, social and health education contains general guidance on safety, and we may revisit that aspect.

The hon. Gentleman then moved from being constructive to being slightly grudging and churlish, although it may have been merely the tone of his voice. I believe that he said that he would ask me three questions, but I stopped counting at 10. I shall endeavour to respond to some of the points that he quite properly made.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the rural roads report, which I am told will be available in November. He also asked whether it will be delivered by 2001; the answer is yes. He asked when a progress report on speed cameras and their effectiveness will be available. That report will be available shortly; I hope in weeks rather than months.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the European directive on car design and whether we should opt for regulation or agreement. We are considering whether a voluntary agreement can be struck with car manufacturers. The attraction of such an agreement is that it can be implemented fairly rapidly, and we can monitor its progress. As he knows, the difficulty with a directive is that it takes time, as the democratic process in the European Union takes time, and it could be two, three or even more years before agreement is reached on a directive. We must decide whether to go for the quick option of a voluntary agreement or to opt for a directive that would probably be effective but might take longer to implement.

Tom Brake: If the Government decide to take the voluntary route, can the Minister give hon. Members an undertaking that action will ultimately be taken if the voluntary agreement does not achieve the 20 per cent. cut in pedestrian deaths and serious injuries that the directive will apparently achieve?

Mr. Jamieson: Clearly, if the voluntary agreement were ineffective, it would be absolutely right for my Department to revisit it and consider further measures. I believe that it has been suggested in some quarters that the two may run in parallel. However, we must consider those matters with our partners in Europe. We are mindful of the hon. Gentleman's points.

Mr. Sheerman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. I could not be here earlier because I was chairing a meeting in another part of the Palace, as I am chairman of the global road safety partnership of the World Bank. I apologise to my hon. Friend and to you, Mr. Winterton. Twenty years ago, we were shown a soft body design by certain car manufacturers. However, cars today are still designed in a way that kills pedestrians in a pretty awful way. They still have all those sharp corners and hardness of impact. Relying on the motor industry for voluntary agreements is not always the best way. I am a little impatient with the EU at the moment.

Mr. Jamieson: I thank my hon. Friend. I bow to his enormous experience in this field. Many of us share his impatience. We will look at that carefully. It is not easy, as he will know, to design the front of a car to lessen the impact on pedestrians. One design will suit adults, another will suit larger children and yet another will suit smaller children. It is a complex engineering area. Nevertheless, I accept the thrust of his remarks.

[Mr. Jamieson]

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington asked about the Gloucester safer cities initiative and whether it could be extended to rural areas. The answer is yes; it will be extended in due course. He asked whether more police officers would be required for some of the schemes that we mentioned. That is a matter for the Home Secretary, but my Department is in close liaison with the Home Office on those important matters. He asked also about the support for dropping the charge of careless driving. A review of road traffic penalties is under consideration.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about enlarging the role of victim support to road casualties. Representatives of RoadPeace met Lord Whitty and we have available in the Department the record of their discussions. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that a consultative document allows us to go down the routes about which he asked. He asked also whether cycling was increasing or decreasing. It is difficult to collect the statistics, and he will know why. My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead also mentioned that. The feeling is that the numbers of people cycling are probably static, but that is not a wholly accurate statistic.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) made a passionate and extremely well-informed contribution to the debate. She gave a full description of many aspects of road safety. I agreed with much of what she said. I liked her comment about speedometers. My first car was a 1934 Austin 10 and I was delighted to see that the speedometer went up to 80 mph. I soon discovered that at anything above 40 mph the car felt like it was about to disintegrate and was desperately dangerous. I therefore had to learn to drive within the capability of that car. Its brakes and steering were limited and it could not pull up as quickly as modern cars can and could not corner. Our general theme, and the point where I came in on this debate, is that we have to drive within the limits of the road and the limits of the vehicle. That is where intelligent thinking by the driver is important.

Mr. McWalter: Is my hon. Friend aware of the sweet patch at 68?

Mr. Jamieson: My hon. Friend has more experience of these things than I do, and so I shall pass on to my next point.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon made some good points about motorists feeling safe in their cocooned environment and not paying proper attention to what is outside it. That is a powerful argument. One part of the Think! campaign, which we launched yesterday, draws drivers' attention to speed limits so that they think about what is happening outside their little cocoon. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, 5 mph extra above 30 mph leads to 21 ft or 6.5 m extra in braking distance. Braking distance increases exponentially at higher speeds—one needs a far longer braking distance at 40 mph. Those campaigns are about making drivers aware that, although they are in the cocooned confines of their vehicles, they must think about things that are happening outside.

My hon. Friend mentioned safety outside schools. It is important that we consider road safety, especially when pupils go in and out of school. It is difficult to talk of one solution to that problem because schools and roads differ, but my hon. Friend raised some important points. Schemes such as the one providing for safer journeys to schools and local authority initiatives such as improving signing outside schools and putting in calming measures have been successful. I can assure her that road safety for the 24,000 schools in this country is an important issue that will be in our minds and hearts during the coming months and years.

My hon. Friend made a sexist remark when she distinguished between the driving capabilities of men and women. Unfortunately, she has statistics on her side in that men do have a worse record of accidents than women, so I shall swiftly move on from that subject.

My hon. Friend mentioned bus lanes and their importance in road safety. Provisions on their use are enforced in different ways in different parts of the country because on that issue local people are making local decisions. In some areas, taxis are permitted to use them and in one or two areas motor cycles are also allowed. However, we shall be monitoring bus lanes carefully. Indeed, we are looking for a pilot scheme area for motor cycles, so if my hon. Friend sees me afterwards we may be able to assist her.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud always makes a thoughtful contribution to debates on this subject. He particularly stressed the need for proper education and for people to show tolerance. Indeed, a general theme in today's debate is that thoughtfulness and tolerance are as important as the enforcement of the law.

My hon. Friend raised some issues connected with cycle helmets. The Department's evidence clearly shows that wearing cycle helmets reduces the severity of injuries, particularly for children. However, we shall take his comments on board.

My hon. Friend referred to the safer cities project in Gloucester. If he does not already have the relevant document, he may want to acquire a copy from the Department because some of the statistics relating to roads are really impressive. The document openly points out those measures that were unpopular and ineffective. However, the project generally improved road safety in the area. For example, in Barton road, which passes through a fairly rundown area of Gloucester, there were 81 accidents in the three years before the scheme was introduced. However, in the time the scheme was running, there was a 24 per cent. reduction in those accidents.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of seat belts on coaches. He will be pleased to know that it will soon become compulsory to fit lap belts on coaches. If he would like further details on that matter, the Department can provide him with more information.

My hon. Friend asked whether we could take up with the DVLA the issue of medical tests for people who persistently drink and drive. If repeat offenders and those people found to have more than 200 mg per 100 ml refuse to take a test, they must have a medical to get their

licence back. He asked whether the Bill on safety will contain elements of road safety. I assure him that it will contain some elements of the road safety strategy.

Mr. Kidney: At one point, my hon. Friend attributed to me an argument made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), so I waited to see whether my hon. Friend the Minister would give him the answer to my one outstanding question. That was about blood-alcohol levels, and whether the Government accept that a lower limit of 50 mg would save lives and will adopt that level.

Mr. Jamieson: I assure my hon. Friend that that idea is under active and close consideration, but it must be carefully scrutinised. We must consider enforcement, and whether it will contribute to road safety, the only important criterion by which we can judge it. It will be discussed in that context.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead repeatedly talked about the Government not seeming to be anti-motorist. I assure him that the Government are not anti-motorist. I am not anti-motorist. We are pro-motorist, but, equally, we are pro-cyclist, pro-pedestrian and pro-safe use of the roads. That is a better way of looking at the matter. The people who are most at risk from dangerous motoring are other motorists. The pressure for better standards on the roads comes largely from people who drive cars because they want to drive in a safe environment where they are not threatened by people who are speeding or have consumed an excess amount of alcohol. We are pro-motoring, but that is safe motoring. Our environmental targets and targets on noise also have to be considered.

My hon. Friend mentioned creating safer environments for children to play in and graphically described the environment that he would want for his own and his constituents' children to play in. I strongly subscribe to that. There are areas in many of our cities, and even villages, where it is difficult for children to play outside and have proper recreation because there are no back gardens, and flats and houses are small.

There was, I think, some confusion between my hon. Friend's description of home zones and the 20 mph limits. The home zones are concerned not only with the speed of vehicles but with the whole quality of the environment in that area. That might refer to housing, safety on the road or crime-reducing measures, such as installing proper lights and widening pavements. As I said to him on Tuesday night, the 20 mph limits are matters for local authorities. If he wishes to pursue them in parts of his constituency, he must take that up with his local highway authority.

Mr. McWalter: One implication of what I said was that, instead of having powers only to ask local authorities to set speed limits of between 20 and 70 mph, the Government could empower them to have, among other things, substantially lower speed limits. Is the Minister willing to instruct local authorities accordingly?

Mr. Jamieson: If my hon. Friend is suggesting that speed limits go below 20 mph, I should say that some engineered solutions that I have seen make it difficult to

drive faster than 10 or 15 mph. Those are not enforced speed limits; in some home zones, matters have been so engineered that it is exceedingly difficult to drive at all.

We must also consider the needs of the people living in those roads and their own sensible, intelligent car use. We must balance all factors in drawing up, and consulting on, such schemes. They can be controversial, because people in the area do not always have a coalescence of view on how best to make progress.

As to increasing the speed limit to 80 mph or beyond—on Tuesday night we were steaming along at 120 mph in a 1.2 litre Vauxhall Corsa—I do not find it an attractive option. All the evidence suggests, as my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield said, that increased speed limits lead to increased accidents on the road. I also oppose it on environmental grounds. The pollutants per mile—exhaust and noise emissions—are substantially greater for every 10 mph increase in speed. I have seen nothing to convince me that we need to move on from the 70 mph limit, let alone to an 80, 90 or 120 mph limit.

Mr. McWalter: As my hon. Friend is aware, that applies only when there is an intelligent speed interface with a global positioning system. It is a futuristic example, but I take his point.

Mr. Jamieson: I accept that. My hon. Friend may be suggesting that, as science develops rapidly, it may not be so futuristic. Some car manufacturers are examining the possibilities of having intelligence devices in vehicles. However, we have to take other factors—the catastrophic failure of a tyre or an engine, for example—into account. The result at 120 mph will be very different from that at 60 mph. A vehicle can be brought under control after a catastrophic blowout of a tyre at 60 mph, but that would be impossible at 120 mph and would almost certainly lead to a major crash.

I have endeavoured to answer the questions put to me and I appreciate your strictures, Mr. Winterton, on some hon. Members. We have had a thoughtful and interesting debate, which has reinforced the cross-party consensus on many issues raised today. I am pleased to have initiated the debate and I assure everyone that road safety will be central to the Government's strategy on improving life for motorists and pedestrians and enhancing the liveability of some of our communities. It has been a well-tempered debate under your excellent chairmanship, Mr. Winterton, and I look forward to returning to our subject in the not-too-distant future.

5.25 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) *rose—*

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley), I must say that I frown on hon. Members arriving extremely late for debates and expecting to be called. A few moments remain and I do not have to adjourn the sitting until 5.30 pm, so—exceptionally—I call the hon. Member.

Mr. Bottomley: You have taken the words out of my mouth, Mr. Winterton. I would have preferred to be able to speak earlier, but that is life. I was not present

[Mr. Bottomley]

until now because one of my constituents broke his wrist while walking down the street and faced a section 5 charge under the Public Order Act: I was expected to be a witness in Chichester court. I am pleased to have arrived in time to hear the Minister's winding-up speech. I apologise for missing the rest of his remarks: he has a natural gift for the subject and I hope that he enjoys his ministerial responsibilities.

I join the Minister in paying tribute to the blue light users—the police, the ambulance and the fire service who have to cope with the consequences of our mistakes. None of the 3,400 road deaths a year is a pure accident. All have causes and most have consequences. We should pay tribute to those who are called out—day or night, in good or bad weather—and have the awful job of knocking on a stranger's house to say that someone will not be coming home. The reason for involvement in road casualty reduction is minimisation of avoidable disadvantage, distress and handicap.

Safety developments for coaches are important. When, sadly, there has been a coach crash involving fatalities, the media should say whether the people killed were sitting in the exposed seats. If we could get people to avoid those seats—the unprotected seats beside the driver and the middle seat in the back row—or to wear seat belts, the number of deaths in coach crashes would, I believe, be cut by 75 per cent. overnight. The media, however, do not report that. I ask them kindly to say whether those who have died in crashes were wearing seat belts. The present situation is about as ludicrous as that of people who die in early middle age because they smoke. The media and coroners conceal that fact, but we should be far more open about the factors, not necessarily causes, associated with deaths that are often unnecessary.

I suggest that when the courts process drink-driving charges, especially when people are significantly above the legal limit—which is by no means a safe limit, although it may not be right to change it—the places where they have been drinking and their drinking companions should become publicly known. A bar owner or host of a party should not necessarily be charged, but such people should not get away without publicity if they knowingly supplied a driver with a significant amount of drink. Equally, people's drinking

companions should become known, because we are responsible. We set the peer group pressure and influence the culture, which matters.

I suspect that most Ministers would want to duck my final point, because it is controversial. As we move from a glorious summer to autumn, changing the clocks will lead to an excess of deaths of between 80 and 120 people—about twice the total number of deaths from variant CJD. The reason for that may be publicity in Scotland, although in practice even people in the central populated belt of Scotland would gain by not changing the clocks in autumn. If that is so and the only people who can conceivably be adversely affected are those living up in Caithness and Sutherland, why do we not have an open debate and have the Scottish Parliament consider the issue for the benefit of Scotland as a whole as well as the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Jamieson: The hon. Gentleman has made interesting points in the little time that was left, and I will certainly take that into consideration. Let me also place on the record our appreciation and a tribute to him for the contribution to road safety that he has made over a long time. I had hoped to be able to say that earlier.

Mr. Bottomley: I am grateful to the Minister and I end by repeating my apology to you, Mr. Winterton, and to other hon. Members. At the Royal Society discussion on scientific advice to the Government, I said that the only thing that I had done when a junior Minister with responsibility for road casualties was to take the advice of the interdepartmental committee. I think that its members were quite pleased that a Minister was willing to read what they had written, to do what they had suggested and not to do things that were justified by the argument that if it saves only one life, it is worth while.

Despite all the good measures that have been taken, 3,400 lives have been lost, so we must do more than save just one life. We must influence the hundreds and thousands of people who take actions with the risk of one in 100. That mathematics leads to deaths, tragedy and misery, most of which we agree is avoidable.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): I am sure that I speak for all hon. Members present when I say that we accept the hon. Gentleman's apology and respect the serious way in which he deals with constituency matters.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes past Five o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 21 June 2001

PRIME MINISTER

European Council (Gothenburg)

Ian Stewart: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the meeting of the European Council he attended in Gothenburg. [405]

The Prime Minister: A meeting of the European Council was held in Gothenburg on 15 and 16 June. I attended, accompanied by my right hon. Friend the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary.

The European Council was preceded by an EU/US Summit and by a dinner of European Heads of Government with President Bush. The European Union and the United States were able to make common cause in our approach to the middle east, the Balkans, our relationship with Russia, and European security and defence policy. We also made a joint commitment to work to settle bilateral trade disputes and to launch a new round of world trade negotiations in November.

On the environment, the United States shared the European Union's concern over the problem of climate change, and the need for a global response to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Views on the Kyoto Protocol differed. The European Union remains committed to the Kyoto Protocol and to its ratification. The United States does not accept the Kyoto target, but President Bush did stress America's acceptance of a science-based approach and a willingness to work with us in a new High-Level Group to try to reach agreement. He also said that the US Administration would participate actively in the Kyoto follow-up meeting in Bonn in July.

The European Council reaffirmed its commitment to enlargement which is vital to the stability and prosperity of the candidate countries, and will bring economic benefits to all European countries, including our own. We have agreed to work to complete the negotiations for the first wave of candidate countries by the end of 2002 so that they can participate as members of the European Union in the European Parliament elections in 2004. At the end of the Gothenburg meeting, the EU Heads of Government met the leaders of the countries who have applied to join the Union.

The Council discussed the Irish referendum result and offered the Irish Government its support in finding a way forward that will allow enlargement to go ahead as planned.

For the first time, the European Union adopted a strategy for sustainable development focused on the problems of climate change; public health and food safety; poverty; and transport congestion. Sustainable development will be an important element of the Union's work in economic, social and environmental areas. The conclusion usefully emphasised that the Common

Agricultural Policy and its future development must contribute to achieving sustainable development. This fits in well with the United Kingdom's agenda of CAP reform.

The Swedish presidency has made good progress in furthering the European security and defence policy (ESDP). It has taken forward the implementation of the Nice decisions on ESDP and the work to improve military capabilities. The presidency has also achieved much in developing the civilian aspects of crisis management, including progress towards meeting the agreed target on police and establishing further targets on other civilian aspects. One of the lessons of Kosovo was the importance of this area of work and we welcome the presidency's achievements. The presidency rightly focused on conflict prevention, and the European Council endorsed the presidency's programme of priorities for co-operation. The programme also proposed arrangements for enhanced EU/UN consultation. All partners recognised that we must ensure that the EU's evolving military and civilian capacities provide added value for the UN.

Given the grave concern we all felt at the deteriorating situation in Macedonia, the European Council decided that a resident EU representative in Skopje should be appointed, acting under the authority of High Representative Solana, in order to provide day-to-day EU input to the political negotiations between the Macedonian parties, and to liaise with representatives of NATO, the United States and the EU's other main partners on the ground.

The European Council considered developments in the middle east, in Algeria, in East Timor, where it expressed support for the forthcoming elections for the constituent Assembly, and in Korea, where it welcomed the result of the recent EU high-level mission. The European Council also committed itself to strengthening international efforts to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and in particular of ballistic missiles.

This was a workman-like Council, well chaired by Prime Minister Persson, usefully carrying out the democratic business of the European Union in the interests of its member states. The democratic process has often been accompanied by peaceful protest. What is not acceptable is what happened in Gothenburg, where malicious violence by a minority of protesters threatened the lives and livelihoods of innocent people. It is essential for all of us that such violence should be resisted and should not be allowed to disrupt the entirely necessary work of building the security and prosperity of people in Europe and the wider world.

North Atlantic Council (Brussels)

Ian Stewart: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the meeting of the North Atlantic Council he attended in Brussels. [407]

The Prime Minister: I attended a special meeting of the North Atlantic Council at NATO Headquarters on 13 June, which was convened to coincide with President Bush's first official visit to Europe.

The meeting highlighted the enduring importance of the transatlantic link and the continuing role NATO plays in guaranteeing our defence and promoting peace and security beyond its borders.

NATO has adapted well to face the new challenges of the post-cold war world. Over the last decade, NATO has done much to bring stability to the Balkans, welcomed three new members and built a new strategic relationship with Russia. It has also established new security links to other states in the Euro-Atlantic area.

The special meeting of the North Atlantic Council was a valuable opportunity for us to review the challenges ahead and look forward to the NATO Summit in Prague in November 2002.

Our discussions focused on five issues:

we recognised the emerging threat posed to all members of the Alliance by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the missiles to deliver them. This poses a major security challenge to NATO. In dealing with the threat, the British Government believe we need a strategy which includes offensive and defensive systems, rigorous implementation of national and multinational proliferation controls, and continued reductions in nuclear arms. Together, Alliance leaders welcomed the extensive programme of consultations undertaken by the US Government on how best to counter the threat, and looked forward to the further intensive consultations that lie ahead;

NATO's success has attracted new applicants for membership. NATO is committed to review the question of enlargement at the Prague Summit. Lord Robertson has said that he expects the Alliance to launch a new round of enlargement then. I made clear my view that once the political and military criteria agreed by NATO at the Madrid and Washington summits are met, applicants should be invited to join;

we discussed the progress which has been made in developing Europe's capacity for crisis management operations where NATO as a whole chooses not to be engaged. President Bush made clear his view that the development of this capacity will strengthen European security. We agreed on the need to assure the EU's access to NATO's planning capabilities, which is key to ensuring that the European Union's security and defence policy is firmly linked to NATO;

the Alliance has made great progress in bringing stability to south-east Europe, but we face continuing challenges from extremists in Macedonia. NATO leaders recognised the urgent need for action by the international community to help restore stability there;

Lord Robertson stressed the continuing need for NATO's member states to invest in the modern defence capabilities which the Alliance must have available if it is to remain effective. I agreed strongly with him.

One of the reasons for NATO's continued success is that it provides a forum in which Europeans and North Americans can debate the security questions which confront us all. The success of this special meeting of the North Atlantic Council showed that this is as much the case today as ever. I look forward to further progress on all these issues by the time NATO leaders meet again in Prague next year.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment Action Plan

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will place copies of the United Kingdom's employment action plan in the Library. [340]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: I have today placed in the Library copies of the UK employment action plan, which sets out the Government's policies for implementing the 2001 employment guidelines agreed at the European Council held in Nice in December 2000. The plan

contains the latest information on policies for employment and employability, encouraging entrepreneurship and labour market adaptability, lifelong learning and equal opportunities.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what her plans are for laying before Parliament the revised Special Educational Needs Code of Practice. [11]

Estelle Morris: On 20 June, I laid before both Houses of Parliament a draft revised Special Educational Needs Code of Practice for England, as required under section 314(3) of the Education Act 1996. A Special Educational Needs Code of Practice for Wales will be placed before the National Assembly for Wales for approval separately.

I have made and laid before Parliament yesterday the Education (Special Educational Needs) (England) Regulations 2001 and the Special Educational Needs (Provision of Information by Local Education Authorities) (England) Regulations 2001. They have been made under powers provided for by parts IV and I respectively of the Education Act 1996. The Education (Special Educational Needs) (England) Regulations update and replace the Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations 1994 for England only while the Special Educational Needs (Provision of Information by Local Education Authorities) (England) Regulations 2001 required local education authorities to publish specific information about their policies for children with special educational needs. Arrangements in Wales will be considered by the National Assembly for Wales.

I have also placed in the Libraries illustrative mock-ups of the proposed final design of the revised Code of Practice. All of the documents being presented to Parliament today are being made available to the All Party Disablement Group and the All Party Children Group.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Low Pay Commission

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the recommendations of the report from the Low Pay Commission. [406]

Ms Hewitt: The Low Pay Commission (LPC) submitted volume II of its third report to the Government on 11 June. The Government are today publishing the report and the detailed Government response to its recommendations.

The Government are required by law to lay a report before each House of Parliament explaining their response to the LPC's recommendation. That report has now been laid. It says that:

The Government accept the recommendation to give the LPC a permanent role in monitoring the minimum wage.

The Government accept the recommendation to increase the development rate from £3.20 an hour to £3.50 an hour on 1 October 2001.

The Government accept the recommendation to make a further increase to £3.60 an hour on October 2002, subject to the economic situation remaining favourable.

The Government do not accept the recommendation to apply the adult rate of the minimum wage to workers aged 21. The adult rate will continue to apply from a worker's 22nd birthday.

The Government note the recommendation for biennial reviews commencing with a report in February 2003. The LPC will be given full terms of reference in due course. The Government agree that when reviews are undertaken they should be over a two year period, in advance of the relevant budget.

The Government accept all the remaining LPC recommendations.

The detail of the recommendations, and the explanation of why the recommendations for 21-year-olds has not been accepted, can be found in the full Government response placed in the Libraries of each House. The Regulations affecting the changes which the Government have accepted are subject to the affirmative procedure and will be debated in both Houses shortly. The Government have prepared a regulatory impact assessment which is also published today, and copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

The Government agree with the LPC that a strategic, longer-term programme of research needs to be established. To this end the LPC is being provided with a new remit to enable it to continue to monitor and evaluate the impact of the NMW, and especially to commission longer-term research. This will help inform the Commission's analysis and recommendations to be included in its next report.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 22 June 2001

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Andy Burnham: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans she has to amend her Department's departmental expenditure limit for 2001–02. [777]

Tessa Jowell: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) for 2001–02 will be increased by £18,700,000 from £1,123,396,000 to £1,142,096,000.

The changes are to provide an additional resource of £18,000,000 to the British Tourist Authority and the English Tourism Council towards the costs of promoting tourism to counter the adverse effects of foot and mouth disease on the industry; to provide an additional resource of £100,000 from the Capital Modernisation Fund toward the development of internet access to the British Museum's Timeline of History and for the linking of this to Culture Online, the National Grid for Learning and local systems; and to provide an additional resource of £600,000 from the Capital Modernisation Fund toward the development of the English Tourism Council's Modernising English Tourism Destination Services, an electronic data sharing network using the web to link tourism providers and customers.

The increases will be offset by transfers or charged to the DEL Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

PRIME MINISTER

Queen's Golden Jubilee

Mr. Hendrick: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has relating to the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Her Majesty the Queen's accession to the throne; and if he will make a statement. [408]

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to be able to announce that Her Majesty the Queen has approved a number of recommendations for the programme of celebrations during 2002, the focal point of which will be the "Jubilee weekend" covering 1 to 4 June. As I announced on 23 November 2000, Tuesday 4 June will be a bank holiday in place of the spring bank holiday that would otherwise fall on 27 May 2002, and Monday 3 June will be an additional bank holiday for the Golden Jubilee.

Following the recent reorganisation of Government Departments, the Ministerial Committee set up last year to help co-ordinate arrangements with Buckingham Palace is now being chaired by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

This significant national anniversary of 50 years of the Queen's reign will offer people of all ages and cultures and from all walks of life the opportunity for celebration, and the events surrounding the Jubilee will provide numerous opportunities for voluntary and community service. It should be a time for looking forward as well as back—including at the great changes that have taken place in the nation's life during Her Majesty's reign.

The main features of the programme approved so far by Her Majesty are as listed. Further details will be announced later.

The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh plan to travel as widely as possible around the United Kingdom during the year 2002, including visits to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These tours around the UK will be focused on the summer months. The Queen will visit each English region, although it will not be possible to visit all cities and counties. The outline itinerary is as follows:

1–2 May

South West of England (including Cornwall, Devon and Somerset)

7–8 May

North East of England (including Tyne and Wear and Durham)

10 May

South East of England (Buckinghamshire and Berkshire)

23–29 May

Scotland

1–4 June

Jubilee Weekend in Windsor and London

7 June

South East of England (West Sussex)

11–13 June

Wales

27 June

Visit to the Armed Forces, Portsmouth

2–3 July

West Midlands (including Staffordshire and Warwickshire)

11–12 July

Yorkshire and the Humber (including West Yorkshire and the East Riding)

17–18 July

East of England (including Suffolk and Norfolk)

24–26 July

North West of England (including Merseyside and opening the Commonwealth Games in Manchester)

31 July–1 August

East Midlands (including Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire), and Yorkshire and the Humber (North Lincolnshire)

4 August

Close the Commonwealth Games in Manchester

5 August

North West of England (Lancashire)

In addition, there will be a number of London visits.

To help local communities mark and celebrate the Jubilee, lottery funding will be available from the Arts Councils, the Sports Councils, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Community Fund, and the New Opportunities Fund. Voluntary organisations and local groups in the community will be able to apply through the cross-distributor "Awards for All" for grants of between £500 and £5,000 for Jubilee-related projects. Projects must meet existing criteria and involve one or more of the lottery good causes of the arts, sport, heritage, charities, health, education or the environment. I hope people will take advantage of this opportunity to use lottery money as a means both of celebrating the Jubilee and providing a lasting legacy for their communities.

The official Golden Jubilee website is being launched later today at <http://www.goldenjubilee.gov.uk/>. In due course it will include details of celebrations and events taking place throughout the United Kingdom during 2002, including the Queen's programme of visits. It will also provide members of the public with a central point for inquiries, suggestions and comments on any aspect of the celebrations. By the autumn of this year, it will incorporate, or give access to, other sites containing information about the plans for the Jubilee.

The Queen has accepted a recommendation for the design for a Golden Jubilee Emblem which members of the public, commercial and public services and manufacturers may use, at no cost, to "brand" events, services, souvenirs and other items connected with the Jubilee. The Emblem, together with guidance on its use, will be obtainable from the Golden Jubilee website. A copy of the Emblem has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Queen has made it clear that she wishes there to be no undue expenditure from public funds on the celebrations. The Queen has asked that those organisations or individuals wishing to celebrate the Golden Jubilee with some form of donation be encouraged to give either to one or more of the following five charities of which Her Majesty is Patron: Barnardo's, CRUSE Bereavement Services, I CAN (national education charity for children with speech and language difficulties), the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, and the Soldiers, Sailors and Air Force Association (SSAFA)—or to the British Commonwealth Ex-Services League, of which the Duke of Edinburgh is Grand President. Further details will be available in due course on the Golden Jubilee website.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Teacher Training

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans her Department has to abolish application fees for teacher training courses. [398]

Mr. Timms: Applications for undergraduate and postgraduate courses of initial teacher training are made through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service and the Graduate Teacher Training Registry respectively. These bodies are in the private sector and it is for them to determine the level of any fees they charge to cover the handling of applications.

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

Housing Transfer

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he will announce the 2001–02 housing transfer programme. [22]

Ms Keeble: I am announcing today the names of the 27 local authorities which, on a voluntary basis and subject to the approval of their tenants, will be able to proceed in 2001–02 with proposals to carry out 32 transfers of all or part of their housing stock to registered social landlords. Including authorities for which I am holding open places, the programme will involve over 328,000 dwellings in large-scale voluntary transfers over two years, generating capital receipts of over £1.1 billion for the authorities.

The 2001–02 programme reflects this Government's commitment, re-stated in the December 2000 Housing Policy Statement "The way forward for housing", to support a continuing programme of housing stock transfers as a means of delivering our decent homes objective. Stock transfer offers benefits for tenants. The new landlord is committed to deliver proper maintenance and future repairs. Increased investment from private sources means that any backlog of repairs can be carried out more quickly than if the properties had remained in local authority ownership. Over time, tenants' rents will be similar to what they would pay to their local authority, due to the Government's policy of bringing greater fairness and cohesion to the structure of social rents, set out in the Housing Policy Statement.

Housing transfers are voluntary, and may only take place if tenants are in favour. The consent of the Secretary of State is also required before a transfer can proceed, and that will only be granted if it appears that a majority of tenants wish the transfer to proceed.

Local authorities on the 2001 programme will be assisted by the newly formed Community Housing Task Force, which will be available to provide expert guidance on the transfer process and to ensure that new social landlords created by the transfer process empower tenants, regenerate communities and make other cross-service links.

Ealing LBC, Harrogate BC and Hackney LBC (for a second transfer comprising its sheltered housing stock) applied for places on this year's programme, but I am giving them more time to develop their transfer proposals. I am also holding open a place on the programme for Birmingham CC, pending the agreement of a minimum valuation. I welcome the application received from Sheffield city council and, while not securing a place on the 2001–02 transfer programme, I am inviting them to work with the Community Housing Task Force to refine their proposal with a view to submitting an application for a subsequent year's transfer programme.

The authorities which have successfully gained a place on the programme, together with the intended recipient registered social landlord, are as follows:

- (i) a disposal by Mid Bedfordshire district council of not more than 3,300 dwelling-houses to Aragon Housing Association;

- (ii) a disposal by Bradford city council of not more than 26,136 dwelling-houses to a new registered social landlord comprising a group structure of six new local housing companies;
- (iii) a disposal by Braintree district council of not more than 8,862 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;
- (iv) a disposal by Carlisle city council of not more than 7,687 dwelling-houses to Riverside Housing;
- (v) a disposal by Chelmsford borough council of not more than 7,043 dwelling-houses to Chelmer Housing Partnership;
- (vi) a disposal by Craven district council of not more than 1,630 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;
- (vii) a disposal by Crewe and Nantwich borough council of not more than 6,000 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;
- (viii) a disposal by Derbyshire Dales district council of not more than 3,281 dwelling-houses to Dales Housing Ltd.;
- (ix) a disposal by Dudley metropolitan council of not more than 26,702 dwelling-houses to a new registered social landlord comprising a group structure of five new local housing companies;
- (x) a disposal by East Hertfordshire borough council of not more than 5,988 dwelling-houses to Stort Valley Housing Association and Riversmead Housing Association;
- (xi) a disposal by Erewash council of not more than 6,114 dwelling-houses to Erewash Housing Ltd.;
- (xii) a disposal by the London Borough of Hackney of not more than six dwelling-houses to Canalside Housing Partnership;
- (xiii) a disposal by the London Borough of Harrow of not more than 518 dwelling-houses to Warden Housing Association, a subsidiary of the Home Housing Group.
- (xiv) a disposal by Herefordshire council of not more than 5,780 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;
- (xv) a disposal by Knowsley metropolitan borough council of not more than 17,341 dwelling-houses to Knowsley Housing Trust;
- (xvi) three disposals by Liverpool city council of not more than 7,642 dwelling-houses to a new subsidiary of Liverpool Housing Trust; not more than 3,707 dwelling-houses to Berrybridge Housing, a new subsidiary of Riverside Housing; and not more than 2,833 dwelling-houses to another new subsidiary of Riverside Housing;
- (xvii) three disposals by Manchester city council of not more than 2,407 dwelling-houses on the Hattersley estate to Harvest Housing Group; not more than 3,418 dwelling-houses on the Langley estate to a new subsidiary of Riverside Housing; and not more than 3,291 dwelling-houses in East Manchester to a registered social landlord;
- (xviii) a disposal by the London Borough of Merton of not more than 9,612 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;
- (xix) a disposal by Redcar and Cleveland borough council of not more than 11,803 dwelling-houses to Coast and Country Housing;
- (xx) a disposal by Reigate and Banstead borough council of not more than 5,659 dwelling-houses to Reigate and Banstead Housing Trust Ltd.;
- (xxi) a disposal by St. Edmundsbury borough council of not more than 6,308 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;
- (xxii) a disposal by St. Helens metropolitan borough council of not more than 14,507 dwelling-houses to Helena Housing Ltd.
- (xxiii) a disposal by Shrewsbury and Atcham borough council of not more than 5,744 dwelling-houses to Severnside Housing Ltd.;
- (xxiv) a disposal by the London Borough of Southwark of not more than 2,518 dwelling-houses to a new subsidiary of South London Family Housing Associations;
- (xxv) a disposal by Vale borough council of not more than 7,201 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;

(xxvi) two disposals by Walsall metropolitan borough council of not more than 24,283 dwelling-houses to Walsall Group Housing Trust and not more than 2,346 dwellings to WATMOS Housing Trust.

(xxvii) a disposal by the London Borough of Waltham Forest of not more than 2,613 dwelling-houses to Forest Homes, a new subsidiary of London and Quadrant Housing Trust.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what proposals there are to amend the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' departmental expenditure limits and administration costs limits for 2001–02. [775]

Mr. Byers: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Departmental Expenditure Limits for 2001–02 will change as follows:

- (a) The DETR Main Programmes Departmental Expenditure Limit will be increased by £830,614,000 from £11,554,260,000 to £12,384,874,000. The net increase comprises £386,000 reduction in resources and £831,000,000 increase in capital and is the net effect of calls on the DEL Reserve of £831,000,000 and a transfer of £386,000 to the Cabinet Office Departmental Expenditure Limit. The changes are set out in greater detail as follows.
 - (i) The change to Request for Resources 4 is a reduction of £386,000 reflecting a transfer of resources to the Cabinet Office in respect of recruitment of Fast Stream civil servants.
 - (ii) As a consequence of the change to Request for Resources 4, the DETR gross administration costs limit will be decreased by £386,000 from £785,025,000 to £784,639,000.
 - (iii) Provision within the non-Voted element of the DETR Main Programmes Departmental Expenditure Limit will be increased by £831,000,000 from £3,648,363,000 to £4,479,363,000. This reflects the anticipation of end year flexibility of £80,000,000 and a call on the DEL Reserve of £335,000,000 to enable the payment of grants by the Strategic Rail Authority to Railtrack to be accelerated and to increase SRA provision for other purposes; anticipation of end year flexibility of £100,000,000 and a call on the DEL Reserve of £316,000,000 to ensure continued funding and increased investment in London Underground Ltd.
- (b) The DETR Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limit will be increased by £14,500,000 from £36,960,668,000 to £36,975,168,000 comprising £14,500,000 resources. This increase reflects the anticipation of end year flexibility of £14,500,000. The change is set out in greater detail.
 - (i) The changes for Request for Resources 3 are as follows: The anticipation of end year flexibility of £14,500,000 to provide emergency financial assistance to local authorities of £13,500,000 and Local Government Public Service Agreement Administration Grant of £1,000,000. The transfer of £25,000,000 from the non-Voted element of the DETR Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limit to provide for Local Government On Line Grant.
 - (ii) Provision within the non-Voted element of the DETR Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limit will be reduced by £25,000,000 from £134,649,000 to £109,649,000. This reflects the transfer of £25,000,000 to Request for Resources 3 to provide for Local Government On Line Grant.

Following the Machinery of Government changes announced following the general election on 7 June, the DETR Main DEL will require restructuring to reflect the new departmental boundaries. The restructuring will be

effected later in the year when any necessary Transfers of Functions Orders and other administrative actions are in force.

The net increase in the DETR Main Programme and Local Government Departmental Expenditure Limits will be a charge on the DEL Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Sub-post Offices

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made regarding the rural sub-post office start-up capital subsidy scheme; and if she will make a statement. [773]

Mr. Alexander: I have today laid a draft order to bring into effect the rural sub-post office start-up capital subsidy scheme. This scheme, announced earlier this year, reaffirms the Government's commitment to the rural sub-post office network by setting aside £2 million to support initiatives by volunteer or community groups to maintain or reopen post office facilities in areas where the traditional post office is closing or has recently closed. The fund will provide help with the one-off costs of relocating or refurbishing rural post offices.

TREASURY

Financial Services Authority

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects the annual report of the Financial Services Authority to be published. [774]

Ruth Kelly: The Financial Services Authority's annual report is being published today. It covers the period 1 April 2000 to 31 March 2001. During this period the FSA regulated under legislation including the Financial Services Act 1986 and the Banking Act 1987. The report is being presented to Parliament as required under section 117(2) of the Financial Services Act and section 1(3) of the Banking Act. Copies are available in the Library of the House and on the FSA's website www.fsa.gov.uk.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Fisheries Council

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the outcome was of the Fisheries Council held in Brussels on 18 June. [772]

Mr. Morley: I represented the UK at the Fisheries Council on 18 June together with Ms Rhona Brankin, the Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development in the Scottish Executive, and Ms Brid Rogers, Northern Irish Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development.

The Council had a full discussion of the Commission's Green Paper on the 2002 Review of the Common Fisheries Policy. There was considerable support for the UK's major concerns: to work towards a policy which is economically and environmentally sustainable; to retain

the system of total allowable catches and quotas distributed according to relative stability; to continue with existing restrictions on access, in particular the six and 12-mile limits which we argued should be established permanently; to provide for increased involvement of fishermen in developing fisheries policy, in particular through a regionalised approach; to address more effectively the environmental impacts of fishing, reducing discards, recognising the value of low impact fishing and angling, and minimising the adverse effects of fishing on non-target species such as small cetaceans; to ensure more consistent and effective enforcement across all member states; and to tackle more effectively the imbalance between fishing capacity and stocks, not least by ending the use of subsidies by grant aiding more powerful and efficient vessels.

The work on the Green Paper will continue under the Belgian Presidency and the Commission is expected to produce detailed legislative proposals later this year.

The Council agreed conclusions on the Commission's action plan on biodiversity. We welcomed these, in particular the commitment to give priority for action for the most sensitive species listed in the Habitats Directive.

The Commission introduced a communication setting out their thinking on the longer term multi-annual recovery plans for cod and hake stocks. There was also some discussion of the more immediate measures for North Sea cod which are currently being negotiated with Norway. The Commissioner emphasised the serious state of the stocks and the need to take substantial measures if the stocks are to be able to recover. We supported the development of action plans and the inevitable constraints on fishing which would be required if they were to be effective. But at the same time we stressed the importance of engaging the fishing industry in the development of plans and the need to take sufficient account of their impact on returns from fishing. The Commission is expecting to conclude negotiations on North Sea cod with Norway shortly and to introduce measures applicable in 2002; detailed proposals on longer term measures will be put to the Council for consideration in the autumn.

In view of the failure to establish a new fisheries agreement with Morocco the Council agreed that the existing provision for structural funds to be made available to support the fishing fleets affected would be extended until the end of 2001. The Commission plans to make proposals shortly for a restructuring scheme.

Finally, the Commission presented a proposal to extend the multi-annual guidance programme (MAGP IV) for one year until the end of 2002. This will be considered in detail by the Council in the autumn.

HEALTH

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to amend the Food Standards Agency departmental expenditure limit/administration costs limit for 2001-02. [776]

Yvette Cooper: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate for the Food Standards Agency (FSA) the overall resource Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2001–02 will be increased by £7,803,000 (of which £363,000 is administration costs) from £103,440,000 to £111,243,000.

The increase is the net effect of transfers from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) of £7,308,000, to cover the estimated fall in Meat Hygiene Service income resulting from the revised charging methodology recommended in the Maclean report, and transfers of £363,000 administration costs and £132,000 programme costs from MAFF to reflect the cost of additional responsibilities transferred to the FSA. The accruals to cash adjustment figures have also been increased by £11,000 to bring them in line with the SR2000 settlement.

As a result of these changes the gross administration cost limit for the FSA has increased by £363,000 from £41,237,000 to £41,600,000. With the exception of the increase of £11,000 in the cash to accruals adjustment, which will bring the figures into line with those agreed in SR2000, all increases will be offset by transfers from the MAFF Departmental Expenditure Limit (detailed above) and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Robert Thompson and Jon Venables

Mr. George Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will receive the Parole Board's decisions in the cases of Robert Thompson and Jon Venables; and if he will make a statement. [770]

Mr. Blunkett: The Parole Board has informed me today of their decision, subject to conditions, to direct the release on life licence of Robert Thompson and Jon Venables who were convicted in November 1993 of the murder of James Bulger. At the time of the murder both were 10-years-old and James Bulger was two. I would wish to make it clear at the outset that this means that Thompson and Venables will be on licence for the rest of their lives. They will be subject to strict licence conditions and liable to immediate recall if there is any concern at any time about their risk.

First, I offer my deepest sympathy to the family of James Bulger. The circumstances of the killing were horrific and had a profound impact throughout the United Kingdom and beyond. We will never forget it and I can well understand how distressing it is for James's family now to hear this news. We all understand that their grief for the loss of their son in such horrible circumstances continues and our thoughts are with them as much today as over the whole period.

Decisions about the release of those convicted of murder when under the age of 18 are the responsibility of the independent Parole Board. The Lord Chief Justice, Lord Woolf, decided on 26 October 2000 that the tariff for both Thompson and Venables should expire immediately. Before arriving at his decision he had carefully considered reports on Thompson and Venables and information provided by James Bulger's family. My predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, accepted this recommendation as he was bound to do, for the reasons he gave in a statement to the House on 13 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 21.

The tariff is the minimum period a person must serve for retribution and deterrence. Once it has expired an offender is released only where the Parole Board after a very thorough consideration is satisfied that there is no unacceptable risk to the public. A Parole Board panel under the chairmanship of a senior High Court judge and including a consultant psychiatrist and an experienced independent member considered both cases. I know that they will have given very careful attention to the detailed reports compiled in each of these cases. The panel also heard evidence from expert witnesses and will have reached its decisions about risk in accordance with its statutory responsibilities.

It is not appropriate for me to comment on the arrangements for the release of Thompson and Venables as there is a High Court injunction in force to protect their identities and whereabouts from being revealed. However, I can say that the call on public funds will be the minimum necessary to ensure their self-reliance, further education and training and the safety of themselves and the public.

The murder of young James Bulger was a terrible event for his family and the whole nation, but no public interest would be served by pursuing the perpetrators now that the Parole Board has decided that it is no longer necessary for the protection of the public that they should be confined. The injunction was granted because there was a real and strong possibility that their lives would be at risk if their identities became known.

Thompson and Venables are not free—as I have said, they will remain on life licence for the rest of their lives and are liable to be recalled to custody at any time if there is any evidence that they present a risk to the public. The life licences include conditions which prohibit Thompson and Venables, whether directly or indirectly, from contacting or attempting to contact the family of James Bulger or each other. They will also be prohibited from entering the Metropolitan County of Merseyside without the prior written consent of their supervising officers.

The national probation service now has the duty to supervise them and to review routinely the risk of re-offending. There are grave doubts about whether this duty could be carried out effectively without some degree of anonymity. I am assured that Thompson and Venables will be kept under very close supervision and scrutiny by the probation service whose principal aim is to ensure the protection of the public.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 25 June 2001

DEFENCE

Iraq

Mr. Galloway: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what military actions HM forces conducted over northern Iraq on 19 June; and if he will make a statement. [386]

Mr. Hoon: On 19 June, coalition aircraft conducted routine patrols over the Northern No-Fly Zone over Iraq. During these patrols, aircrews came under multiple attack by Iraqi anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles. On this occasion, no coalition ordnance was released in self-defence. In fact, all coalition aircraft involved in the patrols returned to base safely and all of their ordnance has been accounted for.

Saddam Hussein's propaganda machine yet again has made completely false claims. The Iraqis have asserted that, during these patrols, coalition aircraft attacked civilian targets when in fact, the evidence suggests that his own air defence system was responsible. The US Defence Department has stated that it has good reason to believe that one of the missiles fired at coalition aircrew may have returned to earth in the area where the casualties are alleged to have occurred.

British Forces Post Office, Mill Hill

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress of the review of British Forces Post Office, Mill Hill. [56]

Mr. Ingram: The review of the BFPO at Mill Hill has now been completed, but no firm decision has yet been taken. I understand fully the need to bring this issue to closure as quickly as possible and I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as a decision is made.

PRIME MINISTER

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Prime Minister if he will seek an explanation from the Secretary of State for Health for not fulfilling his undertaking of 11 May to reply to letters to him from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mr. E. Graal and Mrs. E. Jones. [399]

The Prime Minister: I understand that my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Health and the Lord Chancellor have replied to my right hon. Friend's letters.

Appointments Commission

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy to refer all recommendations for a peerage to the House of Lords Appointments Commission; and if he will make a statement. [260]

The Prime Minister: It is my normal policy to do so. However, we have always made it clear that in relation to party political peers, the Appointments Commission was taking over the role formerly fulfilled by the Political Honours Scrutiny Committee. It was never the custom that appointments to the Lords to enable someone to take up ministerial office should be subject to scrutiny by that Committee. I have also decided, after consultation with the House of Lords Appointments Commission, that a limited number of holders of very high office may be recommended direct to the Queen by me.

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Pound: To ask the Prime Minister what additional projects are planned for the Performance and Innovation Unit; and if he will make a statement. [975]

The Prime Minister: I have asked the Performance and Innovation Unit to undertake a review of the strategic issues surrounding energy policy for Great Britain.

The review will be set within the context of meeting the challenge of global warming, while ensuring secure, diverse and reliable energy supplies at a competitive price.

The aim of the review will be to set out the objectives of energy policy and to develop a strategy that ensures current policy commitments are consistent with longer-term goals. The findings will also inform the Government's response to last year's report from the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution "Energy—the changing climate".

The work the PIU has already started, on resource productivity and renewable energy, will be an important input into this project. This review will work closely with the resource productivity team and the main Whitehall Departments, as well as business, international institutions, other Government and non-governmental organisations.

The Minister for Industry and Energy will chair an advisory group for this project, which will report by the end of the year. Other Ministers on the advisory group include the Minister for the Environment and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Child Benefit

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister, in respect of the Government's intention to introduce a new tax credit for families with children, if he will make a statement on the future of the administrative arrangements for the Child Benefit Centre in Great Britain. [1062]

The Prime Minister: The new tax credit will build on the foundation of universal child benefit. I have decided that responsibility for child benefit in Great Britain will transfer to Inland Revenue so that when the new credit is introduced in 2003, Government support for children will be administered by one Department. Until the transfer takes place, child benefit will remain the responsibility of the Department for Work and Pensions.

Iraq

Mr. Galloway: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the bombing of a football game in Northern Iraq on 19 June. [387]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence today, *Official Report*, column 17W.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Select Committee (Lord Chancellor's Department)

Gareth Thomas: To ask the President of the Council if he will bring forward proposals to establish a departmental Select Committee to scrutinise the work of the Lord Chancellor's Department. [353]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Lord Chancellor's Department has been scrutinised by the Home Affairs Committee in the past, and this arrangement is likely to be appropriate in the future. The Lord Chancellor's Department's new responsibilities have largely been transferred from the Home Office.

Videoconferencing Facilities

Linda Gilroy: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what plans there are to improve the provision of, and access, to videoconferencing facilities for hon. Members. [833]

Mr. Kirkwood: This is a matter on which the Information Committee's advice would be sought. I hope that, together with other Select Committees, the Information Committee will soon be appointed.

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

Derelict Sites

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what powers are available to local authorities to compel private landowners to clear up derelict sites. [23]

Ms Keeble: Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 gives local planning authorities a discretionary power to require private landowners to clear up sites if they are adversely affecting the condition of land or amenity in their area.

If owners do not comply with a notice served under s215, local planning authorities have the power under s219 to enter the land to carry out the specified work and recover the costs incurred from the landowner.

The Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions last September published research on "Derelict Land and Section 215 Powers" which included a number of practical suggestions to facilitate its use.

Environmental Impact Assessments

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions in what circumstances he (a) requires and (b) expects an environmental impact assessment in support of an application for permission for development. [21]

Ms Keeble: The Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) (England and Wales) Regulations 1999 give effect to the requirements of Directive 85/337/EEC on the assessment of the effects of certain public and private projects on the environment. The regulations apply to categories of projects specified in schedules 1 and 2 of the regulations. For development listed in schedule 1 of the regulations, environmental impact assessment is always required before planning permission may be granted. For development listed in schedule 2, an assessment is required if the project is likely to have a significant effect on the environment by virtue of factors such as its nature, scale or location.

Mobile Phone Masts

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on plans his Department has to tighten planning controls on mobile phone masts. [419]

Ms Keeble: We propose to bring forward shortly changes to the current planning rules and guidance for telecommunications mast development in order to:

strengthen public consultation requirements on mast proposals of 15 metres and below

increase the time for an authority to deal with prior approval applications to 56 days

underline that school governors must be consulted on all proposals for new masts on or near a school or college; and

increase fees to enable authorities to carry out full public consultation.

High Hedges

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what measures he proposes to take to reduce the incidence of high hedges overshadowing or encroaching on people's property; and if he will make a statement. [37]

Ms Keeble: The Government are committed to introducing legislation that would give local authorities in England and Wales powers to deal with complaints about problem high hedges, as soon as there is space in the parliamentary timetable.

Where these hedges encroach on people's property, they already have rights to cut overhanging branches back to the boundary—unless any trees in the hedge are protected by a tree preservation order or the people live in a conservation area. In such cases, people should check with their local council before carrying out any works on the hedge.

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he expects legislation to be introduced to deal with high boundary hedges and trees in residential gardens; and if he will make a statement. [7]

Ms Keeble: The Government are committed to introducing legislation that would give local authorities in England and Wales powers to deal with complaints about problem high hedges, as soon as there is space in the parliamentary timetable.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will set out the timetable for the sale of the dome. [108]

Ms Keeble: There is no firm deadline for the sale. We are, through the on-going market testing, exploring all avenues, and the aim is to secure a sale as quickly as possible. However, it is important that all diligence is done both in the market testing and the assessment of on-going process issues, in order that the process—and the continued regeneration of the Greenwich Peninsula—is not undermined. We will make an announcement as soon as possible, consistent with independent professional advice.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on the estimated market value of the dome site (a) with the dome in place and (b) with the dome removed. [111]

Ms Keeble: A pre-sale valuation of the dome site has been undertaken in the context of the process to secure a sustainable long-term use for the dome. This valuation and Government appraisals of the financial value of the site are commercially confidential while the process continues.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what proportion of the proceeds from the future sale of the dome will be returned to national lottery funds. [112]

Ms Keeble: The allocation of proceeds from the sale of the dome is set out in a legal agreement between English Partnerships and the New Millennium Experience Company. This was signed on 12 January 2001 and announced to Parliament on 17 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 258W.

After deduction of competition, decommissioning and other costs from the sale proceeds, half will be paid to English Partnerships as owners of the land and half to the New Millennium Experience Company as builders, owners and operators of the dome structure. Once NMEC has been wound up, it is intended that any remaining share of the proceeds will pass to the Millennium Commission.

Redhill Aerodrome Ventures Ltd.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if the submission by Redhill Aerodrome Ventures Ltd. to his Department's consultation on airport capacity in the south-east was confidential. [148]

Mr. Jamieson: We received a submission from Redhill Aerodrome Ltd. in response to "The Future of Aviation" consultation document. Redhill Aerodrome Ventures Ltd. asked that its response be kept confidential. We have not yet issued a consultation document on airport capacity in the south-east and east of England.

Central Railway

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what target he has set the Strategic Rail Authority for completing its

feasibility study on the Central Railway proposal; when he expects to receive the SRA's report; and if he will make a statement. [379]

Mr. Jamieson: No target has been set. I understand that the Strategic Rail Authority has just received its consultants' high-level review of the Central Railways proposal and will be advising on its conclusion in due course.

Chiltern Line

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress towards a final decision on the award of the rail franchise for the Chiltern Line. [380]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority signed heads of terms with M40 Trains Ltd. on 10 August 2000 and expects to sign a new franchise agreement in the autumn.

Concessionary Bus Travel

Lawrie Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what progress has been made by his Department in extending the concessionary bus travel scheme to men between the ages of 60 and 65 years. [451]

Ms Keeble: As announced in the Gracious Speech on 20 June 2001, *Official Report*, column 33, we intend to bring forward a Bill during the present Session to amend the relevant legislation.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Class Sizes (Yorkshire)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the class sizes for (a) primary and (b) secondary schools were in (i) North Yorkshire and (ii) the City of York local education authorities on 1 May 2001 and projected for 1 May 2002. [5]

Mr. Timms: The available data are shown in the table.

Average class size—position in January each year

	North Yorkshire	City of York	England
Primary schools			
2000 ¹	25.8	26.4	27.1
2001	25.3	25.9	26.7
Secondary schools			
2000 ¹	21.1	21.5	22.0
2001	21.1	21.1	22.0

¹ Provisional

The size of average primary classes has fallen nationally from 27.7 in 1998 to 26.7 in 2001; by September 2001 we expect that no infant class will have more than 30 pupils. Secondary class sizes nationally rose from under 20 in 1989 to 21.7 in 1997. Since then the growth has slowed and has remained at 22 for two years.

In 2001–02 secondary headteachers will receive an average of £70,000 and primary headteachers £24,000 in direct grant to spend as they choose including on reducing class sizes if that is their priority.

We do not have projections on average class sizes.

HEALTH

NHS Pay Review

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to include NHS scientific laboratory staff in the NHS pay review. [349]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply my predecessor gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Mr. Austin) on 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 80–81W.

Residential and Nursing Care

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many individuals had to sell a property to finance their (a) residential and (b) nursing care, within local authorities prior to the local authority becoming responsible for funding their care; and if he will make a statement. [182]

Jacqui Smith: This information is not held centrally.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many (a) residential and (b) nursing placements were being funded at the end of 2000–01. [181]

Jacqui Smith: The table shows the number of local authority supported residents in residential or nursing care at 31 March 2000, the latest year for which information is available.

	<i>Rounded number</i>
<i>England¹</i>	<i>Supported residents</i>
Residential care homes ²	193,100
Nursing care homes ³	74,400
Total number of residents	267,500

¹ As at 31 March 2000

² Includes local authority staffed, voluntary and private homes and small or unstaffed homes

³ Independent general and mental nursing homes

Source:

SR1 form

Social Services Assessments

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what level of assessment is undertaken by social services when a client is vulnerable and self-funding but has no partner or advocate; and if he will make a statement. [183]

Jacqui Smith: Under Section 47 of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 local authorities have a duty to give a community care assessment to anyone, who, in their view, might be in need of community care services. This duty applies irrespective of the person's means and whether or not the person has a partner or advocate. The content of the assessment is a matter for the local authority to decide.

General Social Care Council

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will require the General Social Care Council to develop an interim register that covers all unqualified social care workers employed by local authorities and in the independent sector. [185]

Jacqui Smith: The General Social Care Council (GSCC) will register social care workers who hold the appropriate level of qualification for the job that they do, and who satisfy the requirements as to conduct and competence. Registration will begin with social workers, most of whom are qualified. Other early groups for registration will be residential child care workers and managers of care homes. The GSCC will set out the timescales for registering the remainder of the workforce.

The GSCC will publish codes of practice for social care workers and other employers. All social care workers will be expected to abide by these codes, whether or not they are registered with the GSCC.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what role the General Social Care Council will play in regulating health support workers. [186]

Jacqui Smith: The General Social Care Council (GSCC) will be responsible for regulating social care workers. There are no plans for it to regulate health support workers. The social care workforce in England comprises over a million workers, and the GSCC will concentrate on introducing regulation in this new area.

NHS Staff Numbers

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many (a) consultants and (b) general practitioners were working for the NHS in July 2000. [390]

Mr. Hutton: The Department collects information about the number of consultants and general practitioners working for the National Health Service as at 30 September each year. Information is not available for July 2000.

As at 30 September 2000 (headcount) there were 24,300 consultants and 28,590 general practitioners working for the NHS.

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nurses were working for the NHS in (a) July 2000 and (b) June 2001. [391]

Mr. Hutton: The Department of Health workforce censuses collect the number of nurses working in the National Health Service in England as at 30 September each year.

On 30 September 1999 there were 329,640 (headcount) nurses employed in the NHS. On 30 September 2000 there were 335,950.

Hospital Food

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will specify the remuneration of each culinary adviser involved in the improvement of hospital food. [435]

Mr. Hutton: National Health Service dietitians, catering managers, nurses and patients, along with Mr. Loyd Grossman and his team of seven leading chefs, all contributed towards the development of the better

hospital food initiative, including the development of a new NHS recipe book and menu. Launched on 8 May, it includes new dishes which have been specially designed for modern tastes.

Lloyd Grossman and the chefs provided their services free of charge.

Waiting Lists (Suspensions)

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS patients are suspended from waiting lists; and how many were suspended from waiting lists on 1 March. [428]

Mr. Hutton: Statistics for suspended patients are published by the Department of Health every quarter. At the end of March 2001 (the most recent data available) 76,734 patients have been suspended from the inpatient waiting list during the last quarter of 2000–01.

The National Health Service data manual gives clear guidance that patients should only be suspended from the waiting list if they are medically unfit for the operation, or for other compelling reasons i.e. where a patient is unavailable for admission because of family commitments, holidays or other reasons.

Departmental Responsibilities

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the areas of responsibility that have been transferred (a) from his Department to other Departments and (b) to his Department from other Departments since 8 June. [433]

Ms Blears: No areas of responsibility have been transferred either to or from my Department since 8 June.

Overseas Nurses

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health from which countries overseas nurses are employed by the NHS; and how many nurses are employed from each country. [431]

Mr. Hutton: This information is not held centrally. Information on applications from nurses outside the United Kingdom for registration to the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC) can be found in the UKCC annual statistical analysis of the UKCC professional register. Information on the number of work permits issued to employers is available from work permits UK.

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received from foreign Governments in connection with the employment of overseas nurses since May 2000. [423]

Mr. Hutton: Over the last year we have received representations from the Spanish Government about recruiting doctors and nurses from Spain to work in the National Health Service.

An Inter-Governmental agreement was achieved with Spain in November 2000 to promote closer working between the two countries. As part of this agreement, the first 63 nurses arrived in the north-west of England from Spain on 19 January 2001 to work in four NHS trusts and have now been joined by another 57. Following this

successful recruitment, the initiative is being extended to medical staff through a pilot project also being led by north-west region.

I am also aware that the Department has received representations over the last year from:

Latvia
Philippines
Russia
China
Tunisia
Caribbean
South Africa
Zimbabwe.

Guidance was issued by the Department on international recruitment which emphasises that all NHS employers must ensure that they do not actively recruit from developing countries who are experiencing nursing shortages of their own.

NHS Vacancies

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many (a) consultant posts and (b) nursing posts are currently vacant; and how many posts in each category have been vacant for more than three months. [426]

Mr. Hutton: The Department of Health vacancy survey for 2000 collected only the number of vacancies which have lasted for three months or more as at 30 March. These figures are given in the table.

Results from 2001 vacancy survey are not yet available.

Department of Health Vacancies Survey three month vacancy figures¹ for Consultants and Nursing staff as at 31 March 2000²

	Number
<i>All consultants</i>	600
General medicine group of specialties	90
Paediatrics	40
Accident and emergency	30
Surgical group of specialties	60
Obstetrics and gynaecology	10
Anaesthetics	30
Radiology group of specialties	70
Clinical oncology	10
Pathology group of specialties	50
Psychiatry group of specialties	190
Dental (hospital or public health)	20
<i>All qualified nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff</i>	10,110
Acute, elderly and general care	6,390
Paediatrics	620
Learning difficulties	310
Psychiatry	1,440
Midwives	510
District nurses	150
Health visitors	190
Other qualified nurses	490

¹ Posts that had been vacant for three months or more as at 31 March 2000.

² Figures are different from those previously published due to the discovery of figures for four trusts, which had not given detailed breakdown of vacancies within staff groups, being excluded altogether from the results.

Notes:

- Figures are whole time equivalents rounded to the nearest 10.
- Three month vacancies are classified as vacant for three months or more, but have actively been tried to be filled.
- Totals may not add up due to rounding.

Source:

Department of Health Vacancies Survey.

Private Treatment (NHS Patients)

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS patients were treated by the private sector during the last quarter (a) in total and (b) broken down by speciality. [424]

Mr. Hutton: At present this information is not centrally recorded. We are currently exploring as part of the Concordat with the private sector what additional data collection may be necessary and desirable.

Prescription Payments (Exemptions)

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the medical conditions which warrant exemption from prescription payments. [430]

Ms Blears: The medical conditions conferring exemption from prescription charges are:

- (1) permanent fistula (including caecostomy, colostomy, laryngostomy, or ileostomy) requiring continuous surgical dressing or an appliance;
- (2) the following disorders:
 - forms of hypoadrenalism (including Addison's disease) for which specific substitution therapy is essential
 - diabetes insipidus and other forms of hypopituitarism
 - diabetes mellitus—except where treatment is by diet alone
 - hypoparathyroidism
 - myasthenia gravis
 - myxoedema
- (3) epilepsy requiring continuous anti-convulsive therapy;
- (4) a continuing physical disability which prevents the patient from leaving his residence without the help of another person.

Delayed Discharges

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many delayed discharges there were of NHS patients on (a) 1 January, (b) 1 February, (c) 1 March, (d) 1 April and (e) 1 May; and how many NHS patients on each of those dates there were whose discharge had been delayed but who had fully funded social services packages arranged. [429]

Mr. Hutton: Information on delayed discharges of patients aged over 75 years in England is collected centrally on a quarterly basis. In December 2000 the number of over-75s whose discharge was delayed was 5,801 and in March 2001 this figure was 5,938. In December 2000, 35 per cent. of the people whose discharges were delayed were awaiting placement in a residential care or nursing home or awaiting arrangement of a package of care to allow them to return to their own home. In some cases patients will be exercising their right to await a place in a home of their choice. No information is collected on the funding arrangements for these packages. For March 2001 this figure was 37 per cent.

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the number of acute hospital beds which are unavailable to incoming patients as a result of their occupation by patients needing accommodation in a nursing home. [835]

Jacqui Smith: Information is not available centrally in the form requested. Information is collected for England on the number of people aged over 75 whose discharge is delayed awaiting a care home placement (residential

care homes and nursing homes are not separately distinguished). In the last quarter of 2000–01 (the latest figures available), there were 1,703 such people. Some of these people will be exercising their right to await a place in a home of their choice.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Power Generation

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to assess the feasibility of setting up demonstration plants for cleaner coal power generation technology. [974]

Mr. Wilson: I can announce that a new review will commence this month and is expected to report its findings at the end of the year.

Its Terms of Reference are:

To assess the value of a cleaner coal demonstration plant from four key perspectives:

1. It will specifically take account of the relative benefits and costs, in comparison to other sustainable energy technologies, arising from the use of cleaner coal plant for power generation in the UK to:

Support the Government's climate changes policy objectives through the reduction of CO₂ emissions in the longer term and assessing the potential for CO₂ capture and sequestration.

The contribution it would make to the overall energy policy objectives of the Government "to ensure secure, diverse and sustainable supplies of energy at competitive prices".

2. It will complement other ongoing work looking at energy choices in the context of the need to make substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions over the longer term. Within the context of using coal for power generation, such choices should not only cover cleaner coal plant but also alternative means for extracting the energy from coal, e.g. underground coal gasification.

3. It will consider the four main technical options currently available, each of these will be assessed in the review to determine which is the most appropriate both in terms of value for money and environmental impact. These are:

Retrofitting cleaner coal technology components to existing combustion plants.

Retrofitting coal gasification plant to older combined cycle stations.

New build of supercritical or coal gasification on a brown field site.

Cleaner coal plant with CO₂ capture and storage.

4. It will determine the feasibility of a demonstration project/programme in terms of:

Value for money in terms of promoting the wider use of cleaner coal generation plant including benefits to the UK economy and the potential for export sales.

The various types of plant amenable to clean coal technology.

The cost per tonne of carbon saved, compared to other sustainable technologies.

The emerging evidence on the viability, security, environmental impact and acceptability of capture and storage technologies.

The impact which overseas support schemes have actually had for cleaner coal plant, particularly in the United States, EC and Japan.

State aid issues.

The appropriate use of economic instruments to recognise the environmental case for cleaner coal plant, alongside other technologies.

The nature of the competition or procurement route to support the building of a demonstration project(s) should agreement be secured to develop it.

Ultra-low Sulphur Petrol

David Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many outlets sell ultra-low sulphur petrol in (a) the UK and (b) England. [757]

Mr. Wilson: The latest estimates available are that, as of mid-June 2001, over 98 per cent. of the more than 13,000 retail sites in operation in the UK were selling ultra-low sulphur petrol, and virtually all deliveries of premium grade petrol for consumption in the UK are now ultra-low sulphur. There are no separate estimates available for England.

EU Information and Consultation Directive

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the areas where consultation between workers and employers would be obligatory under implementation of the EU Information and Consultation Directive. [299]

Ms Hewitt: A political agreement was reached at the Employment and Social Policy Council on 11 June on a Presidency compromise text. The text gives employees in the undertakings covered a right to be informed about the undertaking's economic situation, informed and consulted about employment prospects, and to be consulted with a view to reaching agreement about decisions likely to lead to substantial changes in work organisation or contractual relations, including redundancies and transfers. Employers and employees may agree on different arrangements than those prescribed in the directive.

Consignia

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on future ownership arrangements for (a) Consignia and (b) its constituent parts. [297]

Ms Hewitt: The future ownership arrangements for Consignia and certain of its subsidiaries are governed by Part IV of the Postal Services Act 2000. In accordance with sections 65 of the Postal Services Act, no shares in the Post Office company (i.e. Consignia Holdings plc) may be issued or disposed of to anyone other than the Treasury or the Secretary of State (or their nominees) without authority from Parliament in accordance with section 67 of the Act. The Act also prohibits the issuing or disposal of shares in any "relevant subsidiary" of the Post Office company to anyone other than the Treasury or the Secretary of State (or their nominees) or the Post Office company or any other appropriate relevant subsidiary (or their nominees) without parliamentary authority in accordance with section 67. Consignia plc—

the wholly-owned principal operating subsidiary of Consignia Holdings falls within the definition of a "relevant subsidiary".

The future ownership of subsidiaries other than Consignia plc and other "relevant subsidiaries" is a commercial matter for Consignia Holdings plc (or the member of the group who owns the subsidiary), in accordance with the commercial freedom given the company under the Post Office reform package.

Energy Markets (EU)

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions her Department has had at EU level concerning liberalisation of energy markets; and if dates for completion of the single market in this area have been set. [755]

Mr. Wilson: In March 2001, the Commission proposed a new Directive to amend the existing rules on electricity and gas liberalisation. The Commission also proposed a Regulation on cross-border electricity trading. The new Directive includes the date of 2005 for full liberalisation of the EU electricity and gas markets. These proposals were discussed at the Stockholm European Summit. Discussions of the proposals are continuing in the Council Energy Working Group. UK officials are also actively engaged in a number of bilateral discussions with other member states and representatives from the Commission.

Government Regulation

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will outline her plans for reducing the administrative burden on business; and what quantifiable targets she has for measuring progress. [740]

Nigel Griffiths: The DTI will continue to ensure that administrative burdens associated with necessary regulation to protect the interests of consumers and citizens and to provide decent minimum standards for workers are minimised. The regulatory impact appraisal (RIA) process was changed in 2000 to require that administrative and policy costs should be separately identified, enabling us to concentrate on minimising the cost of the administration associated with regulation. Where it is shown to us that administration is excessive, we will reduce it, as we did with the Working Time Regulations in 1999.

The new Regulatory Reform Act will play a vital role in the Government's drive to reform outdated, overlapping and over-burdensome regulation. The Labour Party's Business Manifesto commits the Government to use the new Order-making power in the Act to bring forward a programme of regulatory reform initiatives involving all the key Government Departments. A list of 51 examples of reforms that could be achieved by this means is available from the Libraries of the House, and on the Cabinet Office website.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress the Small Business Service has made in establishing an Index of Regulation; and if its operational target date has been met. [743]

Nigel Griffiths: In line with the principles set out in "Think Small First" published in January the SBS remains committed to obtaining a detailed picture of the impact of regulation and is considering the best way to proceed on this important issue.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to introduce longer lead-in times and consultation periods for new regulations. [747]

Nigel Griffiths: The new Consultation Code requires that public consultations should last at least 12 weeks except in clearly defined circumstances, or where Ministers judge that the particular circumstances require a shorter consultation period. The new procedures for guidance for business on new regulations mean that where new regulations require action from business, guidance should be issued at least 12 weeks before the entry into force of the regulation.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which regulations implemented since 1997 her Department is planning to review the working and impact of. [754]

Nigel Griffiths: We keep the regulatory framework under constant review, assessing the impact of regulations made before 1997 and since. We are also carrying out the following specific reviews.

The Government have appointed the independent Low Pay Commission to monitor and review the impact of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 and accompanying regulations. The LPC is to be established as a permanent body, continuing to advise on the national minimum wage and carrying out associated research.

We are currently reviewing whether the Timeshare Regulations 1997 and Price Marking Order 1999 should be amended in the light of their operation.

We will also comprehensively modernise company law, following the final report of the independent Company Law Review, to be published this summer.

The forthcoming White Paper on the reform of the competition regime will address aspects of that regime dating from before May 1997, as well as those introduced since.

EU Directives

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make it her policy to conduct an audit of EU Directives transposed into UK law since 1997 to determine what use has been made of protective provisions for small businesses. [746]

Nigel Griffiths: The Government have consulted fully on the implementation of all EU Directives since 1997, taking account of the needs of small businesses. We have no current plans to conduct an audit.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many tourism businesses have (a) applied for and (b) received loans under the Business Loan Guarantee Scheme in connection with the impact of foot and mouth disease. [134]

Nigel Griffiths: No information is available on the number of businesses that have approached lenders.

Of the new loans that have been guaranteed by the Small Business Service, where the application forms identify that the businesses have been affected by foot and mouth disease, four of them are considered to be tourism related.

Women's Pay

Ms Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to tackle the level of pay for women relative to men. [464]

Ms Hewitt: The Government have an extensive programme of action to reduce the pay gap between men and women. This gap has reduced from 37 per cent. when the Equal Pay Act was introduced in 1970, to 18 per cent. now. We are taking steps to make the legislation work better, by making equal pay claims quicker and easier. We are working with the Equal Opportunities Commission, employers and trade unions to develop voluntary equal pay reviews. The EOC has received an extra £100,000 to take this forward. The Government are committed to equal pay for its own staff. All Departments and Government agencies must undertake reviews and prepare equal pay action plans within two years. We are introducing Castle Awards to recognise employers' excellence in promoting equal opportunities and pay, and have appointed fair pay champions from a range of backgrounds to promote the issues. We also have a number of initiatives in place to address the underlying causes of the pay gap. These include tackling gender stereotyping in education, removing barriers to women's employment in traditionally male industries such as ICT and encouraging employers to take measures which allow parents to combine work and raising a family. In April of this year, the Government appointed Denise Kingsmill to lead an independent review into Women's Employment and Pay. This review will report in the autumn, and the Government will then consider what additional action is required to make further progress.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Iraq

Mr. Galloway: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his US counterpart on the bombing of a football game in northern Iraq on 19 June; and if he will make a statement. [385]

Mr. Bradshaw: None. Iraq's claim that a football match was bombed by allied aircraft is completely false. Although allied aircraft were patrolling the No-Fly Zones on 19 June and came under attack from Iraqi anti-aircraft and missile fire, they did not fire back.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pension Credit

18. **Mr. Gordon Marsden:** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what consultations are planned with pensioner groups and groups representing

older people on claims procedures envisaged under the new pension credit. [460]

Mr. McCartney: Over 400 responses were received to the formal consultation exercise [Cm4900, November 2000], many welcoming our proposals. We will continue to consider views and work closely with groups representing older people to deliver a modernised and dedicated service to meet pensioner needs.

22. Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the introduction of the pension credit. [465]

Mr. McCartney: The pension credit forms a key part of the Government's overall strategy for tackling pension poverty, ensuring that no pensioner need live on less than £100 a week and no pensioner couple need live on less than £154 a week.

Housing Benefit

21. Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has to reform housing benefit. [463]

Mr. Wicks: Following years of neglect by the opposition, improving administration is the biggest challenge facing the Housing Benefit system.

We published our strategy to achieve this in December and we are working with local authorities to drive up standards of service, tackle fraud and error and promote work incentives.

Retirement Provision

24. Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what action the Government propose to take to ensure that individuals are able to make appropriate provision for their retirement. [469]

Mr. McCartney: The Government are encouraging people to save for their retirement in a variety of ways. We have introduced stakeholder pensions, a new low cost safe, flexible pension option for moderate and high earners who do not have access to a good occupational scheme. We are also providing better information, through leaflets and in time combined pension forecasts, to help people make choices about the most appropriate provision for their retirement. And we continue to work closely with the pensions industry to seek ways of making the regulatory system simpler and easier to operate.

Private Pension Plans

25. Michael Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on encouraging employees to contribute to private pension plans. [470]

Mr. McCartney: The Government attach great importance to providing better information to help people make informed decisions about saving for their retirement. We have already greatly improved the general pension information available by actively promoting our series of pension education guides. And we are working in partnership with employers and pension providers to introduce new pension forecasts giving both state and private pension details.

Minimum Income Guarantee

26. Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what representations he has received on the impact of means-testing on applications for the Minimum Income Guarantee. [471]

Mr. McCartney: The link between the intrusive and complex nature of means testing and non take-up of the minimum income guarantee by some pensioners has been established. A key objective of the Pension Credit is to tackle pensioner poverty and by 2003 no pensioner will have to live on less than £100 per week and couples no less than £154. It will reduce complexity, by modernising processes and removing outdated rules and reduce intrusiveness by, for example, abolishing the weekly means test.

29. Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what are the most recent estimates of increased take-up of the Minimum Income Guarantee as a result of the pensioner take-up advertising campaign. [474]

Mr. McCartney: Over 110,000 additional awards of the Minimum Income Guarantee had been made by the end of May 2001.

30. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimate he has made of the number of pensioners in North-West Leicestershire who are entitled to the minimum income guarantee but who are not receiving it. [475]

Mr. McCartney: Estimates of the number of pensioners entitled but not claiming the minimum income guarantee are not available below national levels. Around two million of the poorest pensioners are now receiving MIG. While over 140,000 additional awards had been made by the end of May 2001, generated by the take-up campaign.

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what proportion of pensioners in Wales have taken up the Minimum Income Guarantee. [476]

Mr. McCartney: Estimates of take-up and non take-up of MIG are not available below national levels. However, over 20,000 additional pensioners in Wales have been awarded MIG during the period of the take-up campaign.

Social Security Offices (Ethnic Minorities)

27. Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what recent assessment he has made of the service provided to ethnic minority communities by social security offices. [472]

Mr. Wicks: The Benefits Agency holds both an annual benefits forum and an annual ethnic minority forum. These present an opportunity for representatives of ethnic minority groups to address any problem areas. As a result of the last ethnic minority forum, held in February 2001, the Benefits Agency policy on provision of interpreting and translation services is being reviewed.

The Benefits Agency is committed to providing a service, which is fair and accessible to all members of the community. Local managers are responsible for ensuring that the level of service is of an acceptable standard. This commitment is also stated in the Customer Charter, which was published in November 1999. The standards in the Customer Charter are measured annually by a range of

internal checks and customer satisfaction surveys. An analysis of the results informs service improvement action plans. All complaints received by the Agency are recorded and the data analysed centrally. The monthly reports produced are also used to inform service improvement plans.

Pensioners Overseas

28. Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on his policy towards UK pensioners living overseas. [473]

Mr. McCartney: UK pensions are paid to anyone who satisfies the qualifying conditions, wherever they live.

Annuities

32. Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has to reform the regulations governing compulsory annuities for pensioners. [477]

Mr. McCartney: I refer the hon. Member to the oral answer given to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) earlier today, *Official Report*, column 382.

Pensioner Poverty

34. Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what progress is being made in tackling pensioner poverty. [479]

Mr. McCartney: I refer the hon. Member to the oral answer I gave the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith) earlier today, *Official Report*, column 373.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on pensioner poverty. [459]

Maria Eagle: Tackling pensioner poverty is a priority for this Government and we have already made a significant impact on the lives of our poorest pensioners by ensuring that no pensioner has to live on less than £92.15 a week.

Social Security Fraud

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the level was of social security fraud in 2000-01. [468]

Mr. Wicks: We are getting to grips with Social Security fraud, tightening up the system and making sure that from the very first claim, the right benefits are going to the right people.

Between 1998 and 2000 we have already made a 6.7 per cent. reduction in the level of fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance. We have conducted further exercises to measure the level of fraud and error, the results of which will be published later this year.

Employment Assistance

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the measures he proposes to take to assist people receiving benefits to find appropriate employment. [448]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Today, there are record numbers of people in work. Labour Market Statistics show that the number of unemployed people is below one million. But we must continue to help those who can work to move off benefit and into productive work.

The creation of the new Department and the Jobcentre Plus, launched later this year, are significant immediate steps. But we are also introducing a Welfare Reform Bill which will extend the scope and flexibility of our welfare to work programmes.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what assessment he has made of the take-up of stakeholder pensions. [449]

Mr. McCartney: There are now 47 registered providers offering stakeholder pensions. Early indications are that they are attracting considerable interest.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Horse Racing

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when (a) she and (b) the Minister for Sport last attended a horse race meeting in their official capacity. [187]

Mr. Caborn: Neither I nor my right hon. Friend have attended a horse race meeting since our recent appointment.

Pub Licensing

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when she expects to bring forward legislation for the deregulation of pub licensing. [188]

Dr. Howells: We remain fully committed to bringing forward legislation to reform the alcohol and public entertainment licensing laws as soon as parliamentary time permits.

Foot and Mouth (Tourism)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what additional funding for marketing she expects to provide to the English Tourism Council and regional tourist boards in response to the foot and mouth disease crisis. [190]

Dr. Howells: The Government made £3.8 million available for PR and marketing at national and regional level. This timely action did much to kick start the domestic tourism season. I have no plans for further national marketing, but the Government have funded the Regional Development Agencies who are now providing further help to promote tourism. The launch of the Devon marketing plan last week was an example.

Olympic Games

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action she will take to promote a London bid to host the Olympic Games. [782]

Mr. Caborn: The decision on whether or not to launch a UK bid to host the Olympic Games is a matter for the British Olympic Association. The Government will take a view on what steps they might take to promote any bid in the event the BOA decides to make a bid.

National Stadium

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress the Government have made in reviewing the options for a national stadium. [973]

Tessa Jowell: My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (**Mr. Smith**) explained to the House on 2 May 2001, *Official Report*, column 852W, that the Government would review options for a National Stadium in the light of the Football Association's announcement on 1 May that it could not deliver its plans for a new National Football and Rugby League Stadium at Wembley. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport announced on 8 May that the Government had asked Patrick Carter, a non executive member of the Strategy Board for Correctional Services, to analyse the alternative ways forward for the project. This work was delayed because of the general election but is now under way. The terms of reference for Mr. Carter's work are:

In the light of the FA's announcement on 1 May 2001 about the project to develop a new English National Stadium at Wembley for Football and Rugby League, to examine if the project can be funded and managed at Wembley, or if that proved impractical, at another location in England. The review should report to the Government within eight weeks.

Mr. Carter will consult interested parties in reaching conclusions.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Justices of the Peace

Harry Cohen: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what progress has been made with the pilot project for sight-impaired people acting as Justices of the Peace. [928]

Mr. Wills: I am pleased to announce that the pilot project assessing the feasibility of sight-impaired people acting as magistrates has been completed. It has been a great success. Nine sight-impaired people were recruited as Justices of the Peace to the Commission areas of Leicestershire, Devon, North East London, Wiltshire, Humberside and Manchester. Each was appointed after having met the normal selection criteria and completed the training. The responses from those who have worked with the sight-impaired magistrates have shown that each one of them has made a positive and valuable contribution to the work of their Benches. My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is therefore removing, forthwith, the bar to appointment of sight-impaired applicants as Justices of the Peace.

Magistrates Courts (Warrants)

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many warrants have been issued by (a) Sevenoaks Magistrates Court and (b) Dartford

Magistrates Court in the last 12 months for which figures are available; and how many are outstanding in each case. [264]

Mr. Wills: Detailed information of this nature is not held centrally, and could be obtained locally only at disproportionate cost.

Independent Appellate Authority

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many (a) asylum cases and (b) other immigration cases are now awaiting consideration by the Independent Appellate Authority. [164]

Ms Rosie Winterton: At the end of May 2001, the Immigration Appellate Authority had 18,145 outstanding asylum cases and 3,230 outstanding other immigration cases awaiting final determination.

TREASURY

2002 Spending Review

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to repeat cross-departmental reviews as part of the 2002 Spending Review. [1063]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The 2002 Spending Review will roll forward existing spending plans and set budgets and outcome targets for Departments up to 2005-06. The aim of the Review will be to determine how best Departments' programmes can contribute to the Government's priorities of:

- delivery of high quality, efficient and responsive public services;
- raising productivity, in the public sector and outside, through improved skills, research and infrastructure;
- spreading opportunity and prosperity more widely, and tackling child poverty and social exclusion;
- improving the quality of life in both urban and rural areas; and
- securing a modern international role for Britain through co-operation with our European and international partners.

The Review will conclude by the summer of 2002.

The Review will take a thorough look at all programmes to ensure that the new plans fully reflect the Government's priorities and the scope for greater efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery.

The Review will include a number of cross-departmental studies, to look systematically at issues that cut across departmental boundaries. The initial cross cutting reviews will cover:

- (a) children at risk: this review will establish the key outcome targets for children's services, including the effectiveness of the current interventions in reducing the risks of young people turning to crime, and identify the main obstacles to meeting those targets.
- (b) public sector labour market: a study of recruitment and retention across the public services. The review will focus on staff requirements in the light of overall labour market trends, the effectiveness of the initiatives already introduced and implications for future policy.
- (c) improving the public space: this review will build on the Prime Minister's work on "liveability", to improve local quality of life including safety, convenience and attractiveness of local streets and amenities.

- (d) small business support: a review to assess Government services for small business, including information, advice, financial support, ease of access and delivery of service where small businesses need to interact with Government.
- (e) science and research: a review of funding of the UK science base and the effectiveness of Departments' own science and research programmes to ensure that they deliver maximum long-term benefits to the economy and quality of life.
- (f) health inequalities: this study will analyse the impact on health of poverty, employment, education, crime, transport, fuel poverty and related factors, and assess and improve the mechanisms for tackling these problems.
- (g) role of the voluntary sector in public service delivery: a review to analyse the current contribution of the voluntary sector in service delivery, the necessary instruments to improve this contribution, and possibilities for improving the range and quality of services offered by the voluntary sector.

Further cross cutting work on other subjects will be carried out at a later stage in the Review.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to review the effects of the climate change levy on business. [293]

Mr. Boateng: As with all taxes, the climate change levy will be kept under review as part of the normal Budget process.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of Working Families Tax Credit on employment patterns in high cost areas. [466]

Dawn Primarolo: Inland Revenue has embarked on a comprehensive programme of evaluation of the impact of the Working Families Tax Credit and the Disabled Persons Tax Credit. The programme of work spans several years and comprises qualitative and quantitative research and analysis. It will be a number of years before the programme of work is completed and such an assessment can be made.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Regulatory Impact Assessment

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans his Department has to ask the National Audit Office to evaluate the content and use of regulatory impact assessments, including public consultation. [744]

Mr. Leslie: I understand that the National Audit Office have already begun a study examining the regulatory impact assessment process. They expect to report later this year.

Special Advisers

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many special advisers (a) resigned and (b) remained in office following the announcement of the general election. [381]

Mr. Leslie: Following the announcement of the general election 62 special advisers resigned and 14 remained in post.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how much severance pay was paid to special advisers following the announcement of the general election; and how much is due to be repaid by special advisers following their reappointment. [382]

Mr. Leslie: The rules on severance payments for special advisers are the same as those that have applied under previous Administrations. Under the terms of the Model Contract for Special Advisers, any special adviser who receives severance following the announcement of an election but who is subsequently re-appointed is only entitled to retain severance pay of an amount equivalent to the pay that they would have received during the period of the gap between the two periods of employment.

Ministers are currently in the process of appointing their special advisers, so it is not possible to determine the overall cost of severance until this process is completed.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Crime Rates (Surrey)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about levels of (a) violent and (b) other crime in Surrey. [147]

Mr. Denham: The table shows recorded violent crime (violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery) and other crime statistics in Surrey for the 12 months to September 2000.

Offence	Number
Violence against the person	6,594
Sexual offences	590
Robbery	342
Burglary	7,576
Theft and handling	22,045
Fraud and forgery	4,272
Criminal damage	10,189
Drug offences	1,727
Other offences	844
Total	54,179

The recorded crime statistics for the 12 months to March 2000 show that Surrey had the second lowest number of crimes per 100,000 population in England and Wales. However, a boundary change involving Surrey and Metropolitan police forces took place on 1 April 2000, when Surrey took on some areas from the Metropolitan police. Figures for Surrey before and after that date are therefore not directly comparable. By excluding the boundary effect (i.e. by assuming these areas were policed by the Metropolitan police throughout the period), the increase in overall crime in Surrey in the 12 months to September 2000 compared with the 12 months to September 1999 is an estimated 3 per cent. The Government are committed to reducing all crime, including violent crime, and to tackling the causes of crime, ensuring proper punishment of those who break the law and providing the resources necessary to tackle crime.

Although there continues to be an increase in the number of violent crimes recorded by the police, the rate of increase is slowing down and crime overall has fallen under this Government. The British Crime Survey, which is widely accepted as the most authoritative source of information on the real rates of crime, indicates that violent crime has been falling since 1995, and reduced by 4 per cent. between 1997 and 1999, the latest date for which figures are available.

National Economic Security

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he takes to ensure that responsibility placed on MI5 to protect the economic well-being of the country is not discharged in such a way as to (a) benefit big business at the expense of small business and (b) undermine the rights of pressure groups and individuals to pursue peacefully their political ends. [215]

Mr. Blunkett: The Security Service carries out its functions in accordance with the relevant legislation. Section 1(3) of the Security Service Act 1989 requires the Service to safeguard the economic well-being of the United Kingdom against threats posed by the actions or intentions of persons outside the British Islands. Section 2 (2)(b) places a duty on the Director General to ensure that the Service does not take any action to further the interests of any political party.

Anyone who is aggrieved by anything they believe the Service has done to them or their property may complain to the independent Tribunal (Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000).

European Public Prosecutor

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the plans for a European Public Prosecutor. [245]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the previous Minister of State at the Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), to the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) on 1 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 529W.

Prisoner Costs

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average cost is of holding a prisoner in (a) male local prisons, (b) male remand centres, (c) open prisons, (d) closed training prisons, (e) open young offender institutions, (f) closed young offender institutions and (g) female establishments; and if he will make a statement. [243]

Beverley Hughes: During the financial year 2000-01 the average cost per prisoner place for each of the above categories are listed in the table.

Category	Cost per place (cash)
Category B	21,674
Category C	17,765
Dispersal	33,804
Female closed	25,123

Category	Cost per place (cash)
Female local	30,412
Female open	17,399
Male closed YOI	23,063
Young Offender Institution (YOI) Male juvenile	44,668
Male local	25,733
Male open	14,733
Male open YOI	21,628
Male remand centre	35,174
Total	22,890

Figures for cost per place reflect establishment costs only and do not include headquarters overheads. These figures are not comparable with the Prison Service cost per place Key Performance Indicator. The establishments that comprise these functions are categorised by their main role only. Establishments that have more than one role have been placed under the category that represents the primary or predominant function of the establishment. These data will shortly be published in the Prison Service Annual Report and Accounts.

Marshall Street

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement about the Government's plans for the former Department of the Environment buildings at Marshall street; [238]

(2) what the proposed capacity is of the planned development on the site of the former Department of the Environment buildings at Marshall street. [237]

Mr. Blunkett: Proposals to proceed with the relocation of the Home Office, including the Prison Service, to a new development on the site of the former Department of the Environment offices at Marshall street, where outline planning consent exists for a mixed office, residential and commercial development, were announced in July last year. Contract negotiations for developing the Marshall street site as a public-private partnership project are currently in progress with Anne's Gate Property plc, the preferred bidder.

The City of Westminster resolved in February to grant detailed planning consent subject to completion of a planning agreement. That has been successfully negotiated and the formal agreement was signed earlier this month. Provided detailed contract terms can be agreed between the Home Office and the preferred bidder, a start on demolishing the old Department of the Environment offices is planned for later this year. The new development is intended to house the majority of Home Office and Her Majesty's Prison Service staff currently based in central London.

Secure Training Places

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about his plans to provide additional secure training places; and when he estimates the places will become available for use. [151]

Beverley Hughes: The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales commissions and purchases secure accommodation for remanded and sentenced young

people. Over the next four years the Youth Justice Board plans to purchase an additional 400 independent sector Secure Training Centre (STC) places to replace Prison Service accommodation.

Criminal Justice System Reserve

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much of the Criminal Justice System Reserve has been (a) allocated and (b) spent to date; and if he will make a statement about his plans to allocate the reserve in (i) 2002–03 and (ii) 2003–04. [244]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Of the £100 million Criminal Justice System Reserve in 2001–02, £85 million has been allocated to date. Further allocations will be made during the year. Information on spend to date on approved initiatives is not currently available as it is in the process of being collected from the three Criminal Justice System Departments. Future allocations from the Criminal Justice System Reserve require the joint agreement of the Home Secretary, Lord Chancellor and Attorney-General. The approval of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is also required prior to the release of money from the Reserve. It is expected that bidding guidance for the Criminal Justice System Reserve for 2002–03 and 2003–04 will be issued to the three Criminal Justice System Departments in August 2001.

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce legislation to exclude from the home detention curfew scheme offenders convicted of violence against public servants; how many such offenders have been released on the scheme to date; and if he will make a statement. [242]

Beverley Hughes: No. Home Detention Curfew was not intended by Parliament to work in this way. It is a risk-based scheme. The statute lists several groups of prisoner who are ineligible for Home Detention Curfew. All of these are concerned with risk to the public or risk of breaching the curfew. In respect of all other offences, offenders can be released on Home Detention Curfew only if they have passed a rigorous individual risk assessment.

Assault on a public servant is not a separate category of offence and separate figures are not available.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce legislation to ensure that victims are informed when a prisoner is released on the home detention curfew scheme; and if he will make a statement. [226]

Beverley Hughes: Provisions in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 introduced a statutory duty on local probation boards to consult and inform victims of offenders sentenced to 12 months or more for a sexual or violent offence about the conditions of release. These came into force on 1 April 2001. Prior to a prisoner's release, the victim may opt to make representations about whether the offender should be subject to any licence conditions and to receive information about any conditions which are imposed and are relevant to them.

I have no plans to legislate for other victims to be told when prisoners are released on Home Detention Curfew (HDC). All those who are eligible for release on HDC are subject to a thorough risk assessment before HDC is granted, and this includes the nature of their crime, the risk to victims, and the likelihood of re-offending.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce legislation to require sentencers to state when passing sentence (a) the existence of and (b) the potential effect on the date of earliest release of the home detention curfew scheme; and if he will make a statement. [225]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The Government are committed to ensuring that the implications of sentencing are explained in open court. The then Lord Chief Justice issued a practice direction in January 1998 requiring a court imposing a custodial sentence to explain the practical effect of that sentence for the benefit of the defendant, any victim and members of the public. Although the practice direction was issued before home detention curfew became available, it makes clear that any future changes to early release arrangements should be reflected in the court's explanation. We will consider whether any legislative requirement is necessary in the context of proposals emerging from the review of the Sentencing Framework.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many offenders he estimates will be released on the home detention curfew scheme over each of the next five years. [222]

Beverley Hughes: The number of prisoners released on Home Detention Curfew over the next five years will depend upon how many prisoners are eligible and of these how many pass the very rigorous risk assessment.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the home detention curfew scheme. [221]

Beverley Hughes: Home Office Research Study 222, "Electronic Monitoring of Released Prisoners: an evaluation of the Home Detention Curfew (HDC Scheme)", published March 2001, examined in detail the operation of the HDC scheme in its first 16 months of operation. It noted that the scheme was one of the largest electronic monitoring schemes in the world. Among its findings were that:

The scheme had helped to provide prisoners with a managed transition between custody and living in the community.

The risk assessment process had worked well, with only 9 per cent. of those released on HDC re-offending within six months of release, compared with 40 per cent. of those not granted HDC.

HDC had generated large savings (£36.7 million in the first year) when compared with the cost of keeping curfewees in prison.

The report concluded that,

"the Home Detention Curfew scheme has established that a large-scale electronic monitoring programme involving several different agencies can be operated successfully and is consistent with an approach to release decisions which puts assessment of risk at the centre".

I am satisfied that HDC has been a success and has justified the support given to it by the Government and Opposition members of the Home Affairs Select Committee, when commenting on it in 1998 (Third Report: Alternatives to Prison Sentences, HC 486).

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, for the period between the commencement of the home detention curfew scheme and 31 May inclusive (a) the number of prisoners released on the scheme, (b) the number of prisoners convicted of each offence who were released on the scheme, with a breakdown of the offences committed, including offences committed by prisoners normally classified under the categories (i) other homicide and attempted homicide, (ii) other violence against the person, (iii) drug offences, (iv) assaults and (v) other offences, including a breakdown of the prisoners normally classified in the sub-category of other offences called other offences, (c) the average sentence (A) received and (B) served, and the average period spent on the scheme, in respect of each offence, (d) the number of prisoners released on the scheme, with a breakdown of the offences committed, who (1) breached the conditions of the curfew, (2) disappeared and were recaptured, (3) disappeared and remain unlawfully at large and (4) had their licences revoked with reasons, (e) the specific offences committed by prisoners released on the scheme while on the scheme, including offences committed, by prisoners who committed more than one offence and (f) the specific offences committed by prisoners released on the scheme who committed a further offence while on the scheme that was similar in character to that for which they were originally convicted, including offences committed by prisoners who committed more than one offence; and if he will make a statement. [223]

Beverley Hughes: I shall write to the right hon. Member and place a copy of the letter in the Library.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff there are in his Department, broken down by directorate. [239]

Mr. Blunkett: The available information is set out as follows:

These figures take account of staff changes arising from the recent changes in the machinery of government. Some minor adjustments to the staffing numbers may arise as a result of the final arrangements agreed between my Department and the other Departments involved. Figures for the non-Agency Home Office and the Forensic Science Service have been taken from the central personnel database. Figures for the United Kingdom Passport Agency and Prison Service have been provided by their personnel units.

Home Office	Staff ¹
Non-Agency Home Office	
Communications Directorate	144
Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	185
Corporate Development and Services Group	795
Criminal Policy Group	372
Immigration and Nationality Directorate	9,651
Legal Adviser's Branch	59
Ministerial Secretariat	81
Organised and International Crime Directorate	175
Planning Finance and Performance Group	197

Home Office	Staff ¹
Policing and Crime Reduction	1,125
Research Development and Statistics	314
Staff on loans or secondments	126
Home Office Agencies	—
Forensic Science Service	2,351
United Kingdom Passport Agency ²	2,778
Prison Service ³	43,897
Total	62,250

¹ Permanent non-industrial staff, being paid as at 22 June 2001.

² Includes 100 staff at the Criminal Records Bureau

³ Staff in post at 1 June 2001.

EU Meetings (Ministerial Attendance)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the dates of the European Union meetings attended by Ministers in his Department from 1 January onwards and the issues that were discussed at each meeting. [150]

Mr. Blunkett: There have been two formal Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Councils and one informal JHA Council since 1 January. All three Council were attended by my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), the then Home Secretary, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche).

The informal JHA Council took place on 8–9 February 2001. The formal JHA Councils took place on 15–16 March and 28–29 May. I am placing the agendas of the formal council meetings in the Library. The Government reported the outcome of these meetings to the European Scrutiny Committee in accordance with the usual arrangements. The issues discussed at the informal Council were: a review of progress on implementing the Tampere European Council Conclusions; JHA aspects of EU enlargement; illegal immigration via the Western Balkans; EU Common Asylum policy; trafficking in human beings, including women and children; and mutual recognition of civil law decisions.

In addition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) attended a Youth Council meeting on 28 May to discuss the proposal for a Commission White Paper on youth issues.

Police Numbers (Kent)

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the police establishment is for the West Kent and North Kent police areas; and how many officers are serving in these areas. [266]

Mr. Denham: The powers of the Home Secretary to set police establishment levels for each force were removed under the Police and Magistrates Courts Act 1994. It is for the chief officer to determine staffing levels within the overall resources available.

I have been informed by the Chief Constable that the establishment level set by the force, and the actual numbers of officers serving in West Kent and North Kent police are as in the table.

	North Kent	West Kent
Force establishment	352	250
Actual	349	254

Proceeds of Crime Bill

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library the responses to his Department's consultation on the draft Proceeds of Crime Bill (Cm 5066). [194]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Yes, I shall do so shortly, except where respondents have asked for their comments to be treated in confidence.

Victims Charter

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library the responses to his Department's consultation, 'A Review of the Victims Charter'. [191]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Yes. Copies of the responses will be placed in the Library as soon as possible, except where respondents have specifically requested that their contribution should be treated confidentially.

Pitch Invasions

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many persons have been (a) arrested and (b) charged by West Yorkshire police in connection with the pitch invasion at Headingley Cricket Ground on 17 June; and if he will make a statement; [762]

(2) how many persons have been (a) arrested and (b) charged by Nottinghamshire police in connection with offences that took place at Trent Bridge Cricket Ground on 20 June; and if he will make a statement. [760]

Mr. Denham: West Yorkshire police arrested five people and charged two for public order offences and one for assault in connection with the match at Headingley. Inquiries are continuing in respect of the attack on a steward. Nottinghamshire police arrested six people and charged four for public order offences in connection with the match at Trent Bridge.

Extradition

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library the responses to his Department's consultation, 'The Law on Extradition: A Review'. [195]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: I intend to provide the House with the disclosable results of the consultation along with my Department's response later in the year.

Corruption (Law Reform)

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library the responses to his Department's consultation on reform of the criminal law of corruption in England and Wales (Cm 4759). [196]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Full responses have been placed in the Library and will be held there for six months.

Best Value

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received from

police forces about Best Value Performance Indicator 131: for what reason the indicator was retained for 2001–02; and if he will abolish it in 2002–03. [153]

Mr. Denham: Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) 131 measures the throughput and quality of files from the police to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

BVPI 131 was included in the suite for 2000–01 and 2001–02 to measure the police contribution to timely and effective processing of prosecution files.

Initial consultation with partners on the BVPIs for 2002–03 has recently ended, and the Association of Police Authorities (APA) and the Association of Chief Police Officers of England, Wales and Northern Ireland (ACPO) have made various representations for amendments, deletions and additions to the present BVPI suite. No decision has yet been taken on any of the BVPI or 2002–03—these will be the subject of a consultation document which is likely to be issued shortly.

Police Standards Unit

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about his proposal for a police standards unit; and what powers the unit will have to issue directions to police forces about operational matters. [154]

Mr. Denham: The Standards Unit will drive up performance and ensure that best practice is applied throughout England and Wales. It will draw on the work of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and engage directly with police at the local level. Plans for the Unit are being worked up as a priority. Operational matters will remain the responsibility of Chief Officers.

Police Pensions

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about his plans for reform of police pension arrangements. [159]

Mr. Denham: I will be considering a range of issues relating to police pension arrangements in the coming months.

Detective Expertise

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about his plans to allow specialist detective expertise to be built up using outside experts; what types of detective work this will apply to; and what types of outside experts will be employed. [219]

Mr. Denham: "Criminal Justice: The Way Ahead", presented to Parliament in February by my right hon. Friend the then Home Secretary, said that where there are gaps which cannot be filled by experience or potential within the service, then there should be opportunities to recruit people with relevant specialist skills in other fields whether from the private or public sector. We are discussing with the police service what the need is and how best to meet it.

Criminal Justice and Police Act

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will bring into force sections (a) 38.

(b) 46 and 47 and (c) 71 and 72 of the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001 with immediate effect; and if he will make a statement about his plans to bring into force those parts of the Act which have not yet been brought into force. [161]

Mr. Denham: We plan to bring section 46 into force on 1 September, and sections 38, 71 and 72 on 1 October. Prior to implementation we shall issue guidance to the police, courts and other agencies who will be involved in the implementation of those provisions. We will announce our plans for implementation of other parts of the Act in due course.

Private Security Personnel

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the accountability of private security personnel to (a) their employers and (b) the relevant chief officer of police, in relation to paragraph 3.159 of "Criminal Justice: The Way Ahead" (Cm 5074); and if he will make a statement. [160]

Mr. Denham: Private security personnel contributing to public safety remain accountable to their employers. They are not directly managed by, nor accountable to, the relevant chief police officer, although there is scope for their activities to be co-ordinated with police work.

Police Working Conditions

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about his proposals for reform of police working conditions. [156]

Mr. Denham: The Government's strategy for reforming the criminal justice system is set out in "Criminal Justice: The Way Ahead", presented to Parliament in February by my right hon. Friend the then Home Secretary. This makes reference to possible changes to police working conditions.

We are currently discussing with the police service how to tackle these and other issues.

Press Officers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons are employed in his Department's press office; at what grades; and what the equivalent numbers were on 1 May 1997. [224]

Mr. Blunkett: There are currently 25 Press Officers in the Home Office Press Office—five Senior Information Officers, 18 Information Officers, two Assistant Information Officers. In addition there is one Chief Immigration Officer on secondment and support staff comprising one Higher Executive Officer, one Administrative Officer and one Administrative Assistant.

On 1 May 1997 there were three Senior Information Officers, 10 Information Officers (two part-time), one Assistant Information Officer, a Higher Executive Officer on secondment, one Executive Officer, one Administrative Officer and two Administrative Assistants.

The increase in the number of press office staff reflects the increase in the number of calls to the press office over recent years and a commitment to openness and

accessibility in providing accountability to the public for the work of the Home Office and to the provision of the services of the Department's press office.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reduce the size of his Department's press office; and if he will make a statement. [248]

Mr. Blunkett: There are no plans to reduce the size of the Home Office Press Office.

While some responsibilities have transferred from the Home Office to a number of other Departments, the Home Office has taken on responsibility for work permits, driving forward the agenda on the United Kingdom Anti-drugs Co-ordinating Unit and for extending the work of citizenship and active communities.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when he expects the review of the voucher system of asylum support to be completed; and when he will report its conclusions to the House; [170]

(2) if the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), completed her review of the voucher system of asylum support prior to 8 June; and if he will make a statement about the progress of the review. [171]

Angela Eagle: My noble Friend Lord Rooker and I have taken over responsibility for the review of the operation of the voucher scheme. We are considering the evidence and will announce our conclusions in due course.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many complaints have been received by NASS in respect of sub-standard accommodation provided for asylum seekers since April 2000; and if he will make a statement. [179]

Angela Eagle: The Housing Management Team of the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has received 253 complaints regarding a range of issues in relation to both housing conditions and management. The complaints are from a range of sources including asylum seekers themselves or their legal representatives as well as voluntary and public sector organisations acting on their behalf.

All complaints received by the Housing Management Team are registered, investigated and monitored. The team liaises as necessary with other agencies such as local authorities and refugee organisations in dealing with complaints.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is on the use of detention for asylum seekers whose appeals have been rejected. [165]

Angela Eagle: Failed asylum seekers whose appeals have been rejected may be detained under the Immigration Act 1971 pending their removal from the United Kingdom. The decision as to whether or not detention should be authorised in such circumstances will be based on the individual merits of the case concerned. Reasonable alternatives to detention will be considered before it is authorised.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for the period since 1 January (a) the number of asylum cases in which an appeal was lodged with the Home Office and (b) the number of asylum cases in which the Home Office passed appeal papers to the Independent Appellate Authority. [163]

Angela Eagle: The information is given in the table. This information is also published monthly on the Department's website at www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html.

	Appeals received by the Home Office ^{1,2}	Appeals sent to the IAA ³
2001		
January ²	8,590	3,500
February ²	10,405	3,630
March ²	10,925	4,180
April ¹	7,700	3,470
May ³	8,000	4,250

¹ Provisional figures rounded to the nearest five. Numbers might not add up due to rounding.

² Based on manual counts of data received in Appeals Support Section of the Home Office. Some cases are received elsewhere in the Home Office before being forwarded to ASS and so may be counted in a later month than when they arrived in the Home Office. These data also include a number of duplicates.

³ Based on electronic sources.

⁴ Estimate. Figures rounded to the nearest 100, and subject to later revision.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many unaccompanied minors who are classified as asylum seekers are under the protection of local authorities; and if he will make a statement. [177]

Angela Eagle: Figures for January 2001 show that the Home Office is reimbursing local authorities for the costs incurred in supporting 6,078 unaccompanied minors classified as asylum seekers.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action has been taken by NASS in response to complaints about the quality of sub-contracted accommodation provided for asylum seekers in Liverpool; and if he will make a statement. [169]

Angela Eagle: The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) investigates all complaints about the quality of sub-standard accommodation. Where faults with the accommodation have been identified the accommodation provider has been required to rectify them.

As a result of its inspection programme NASS has required providers in Liverpool to remove approximately 60 bedspaces from use due to failure to meet the requirements of the NASS contract specification.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his target is for the removal of failed asylum applicants from the United Kingdom; and what measures he plans to implement to secure that objective. [166]

Angela Eagle: The target for the current financial year is to remove 30,000 failed asylum seekers including their dependants.

We are taking a range of measures, including a substantial increase in the number of caseworkers and Immigration Officers engaged on removal work, expansion of the detention estate, increased use of charter flights, creation of additional immigration arrest teams and development of a network of reporting centres, to support delivery of the target.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of failed asylum seekers at large in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [173]

Angela Eagle: It is not possible to give an official estimate of the number of failed asylum seekers remaining in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the procedure is governing the inspection of properties provided by private landlords to NASS for the accommodation of asylum seekers. [168]

Angela Eagle: The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has adopted a twin track approach towards the inspection of property. The main reason for this is to ensure a focus on housing management and support in addition to technical housing conditions.

Firstly, NASS has developed a Housing Management inspection function that aims to monitor the performance of accommodation providers and act upon any problems that inspections highlight in relation to management and support.

In terms of the condition of accommodation and, in particular, health and safety issues, NASS has appointed Contract managers to work in tandem with the Housing Management function to ensure a comprehensive approach towards both housing conditions and management.

Lord Birt

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the role of Lord Birt as the Government's adviser on crime. [216]

Mr. Blunkett: Lord Birt's work has ranged widely over the criminal justice field. His advice, research and analysis are reflected in the Government's strategy document, "Criminal Justice: The Way Ahead" (Cm 5074).

Immigration Officers (French Ports)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with the French authorities about the reduction in immigration officers at French ports; what representations he has made; and if he will make a statement. [174]

Angela Eagle: The withdrawal of immigration control authorities from small ports in the north of France was discussed at the United Kingdom-French summit at Cahors in February.

At the summit French Ministers gave an assurance that they were not reducing immigration controls but simply rationalising the roles of the various border control agencies. Where the PAF (the French Border Police) are withdrawn from a port the Douane will undertake immigration functions.

United Kingdom officials are in regular contact with their French counterparts and are monitoring the situation closely.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the recent incident at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate when an asylum seeker was admitted to the directorate while in possession of a loaded firearm. [155]

Angela Eagle: A man has been charged with a number of offences relating to the possession of a firearm and ammunition and an immigration offence. He appeared at Croydon magistrates court on 15 June and was remanded in custody until 25 June to appear at the Central Criminal Court. I cannot make any further comment for legal reasons.

Custody-plus Sentences

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many offenders would serve shorter terms in prison than at present under his proposals for custody-plus sentences; and if he will make a statement. [217]

Mr. Keith Bradley: I have received John Halliday's report of a review of the sentencing framework for England and Wales, which I intend to publish shortly. Once the report is published there will be a period of consultation and I will want to consider carefully which "Halliday" proposals should be taken forward.

Drugs

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish a breakdown of expenditure on the Government drugs strategy between spending on (a) courts, (b) prisons, (c) police, (d) the NHS, (e) social services and (f) other departments. [737]

Mr. Denham: The Government have made available substantial resources for directly tackling the problem of drug misuse. These are planned to increase from £700 million in 2000-01 to over £1 billion in 2003-04. Information held centrally relates to the four main aims of the national anti-drugs strategy.

Analyses by Department or function are difficult to calculate because drugs spending in many cases forms part of wider expenditure streams or functions. This is compounded by the increased use of pooled budgets, designed to maximise effective, flexible use of resources on the ground.

Details of the planned expenditure for 2001-02 to 2003-04 are set out in the tables.

Key Expenditure Figures

Spending Review 2000—Resources directly allocated for tackling drug abuse (by main aim of the national anti-drugs strategy)¹

	£ million			
	2000-01 ²	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
Drug Treatment ³	234	328	377	401
Protecting Young People	63	90	97	120
Safeguarding Communities	45	79	81	95
Reducing Availability ⁴	353	373	376	380
Total	695	870	931	996

¹ Excludes devolved spending

² Estimates of baseline spend in Departmental Expenditure Limits

³ Comprises mainstream spending by Department of Health

⁴ United Kingdom spend for 2001-02 to 2003-04 based on projected anti-drugs allocation from anti-Organised Crime shared funding

Spending Review 2000—New resources provided for related programmes¹

	£ million		
	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
Criminal Justice System ²	1,420	2,290	2,720
Neighbourhood Renewal Fund	200	300	400
Children's Fund	100	150	200
Connexions ³	77	177	—

¹ Excludes devolved spending

² This was added to existing provision for the careers service. Funding will go to the careers service in areas where Connexions is not yet running

³ Provision for 2003-04 will be announced in due course

Budget 2001—New resources for anti-drugs measures¹

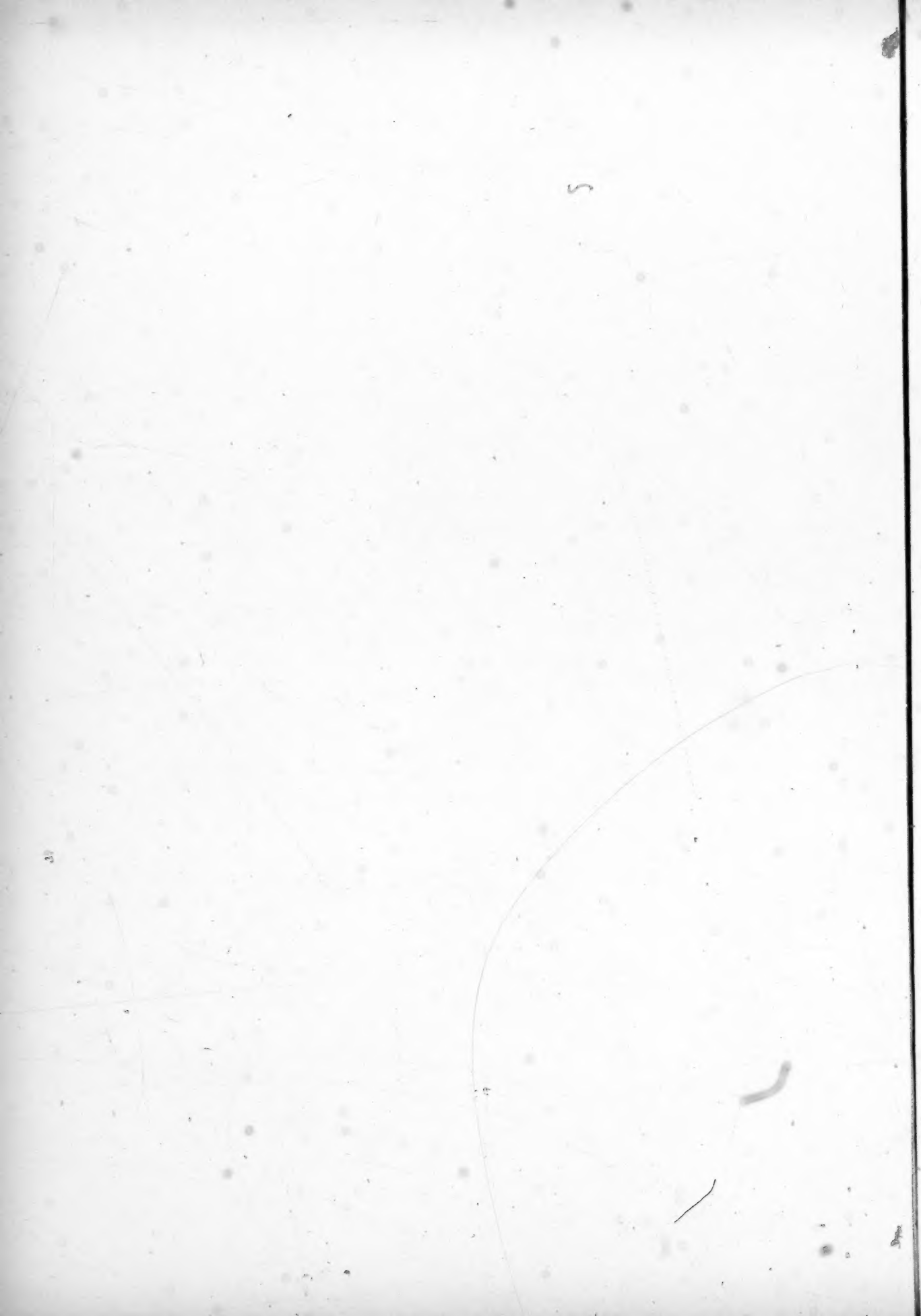
	£ million		
	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
Strengthening communities	50	70	100
Extending drug testing in the			
Criminal Justice System	0	20	30
Providing more help to find jobs	5	15	20
Strengthening Drug Action Teams	5	5	5
Expanding Positive Futures	2	3	0

¹ Excludes devolved spending

Ports Policing

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what account will be taken of the results of the review of ports policing being conducted by the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions in preparation of the proposed Police Bill; and if he will make a statement. [421]

Mr. Denham: The review of ports policing presently being conducted by the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions is due to report its findings in October 2001. Until the recommendations of the Review are published I am unable to comment on whether they will impact on preparation of the proposed Police Bill.



Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 26 June 2001

PRIME MINISTER

Special Advisers

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the Special Advisers with executive responsibilities under the Civil Service Order in Council; and if he will make a statement. [763]

The Prime Minister: Jonathan Powell and Alastair Campbell have executive powers under article 3(3) of the Civil Service Order in Council.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to amend the terms and conditions of employment for Special Advisers; and if he will make a statement. [301]

The Prime Minister: In its response to the Sixth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the Government committed themselves to a new Code of Conduct for Special Advisers and a revised Model Contract. The new Code and Contract apply to all appointments of Special Advisers made after the election. Both documents will be published shortly.

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

Green Belt

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what measures he is proposing to take to ensure that green belt areas are not used for further housing developments; and if he will make a statement. [36]

Ms Keeble: Planning Policy Guidance note 2—Green Belts—already recommends that local authorities' development plans should include a strict presumption against inappropriate development in the green belt. This includes most types of housebuilding.

Floodplains

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions how long PPG 25 has been out for consultation; and when definitive planning guidance on floodplain development is to be published. [806]

Ms Keeble: The initial draft of PPG 25 was published in April 2000. Following the autumn floods and the examination by the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, a revised draft was published in February 2001. The final PPG is expected to be published in July.

Gibraltar

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he will introduce legislation to extend the European franchise to the people of Gibraltar. [422]

Mr. Jamieson [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The UK is committed to fulfilling its obligation to give effect to the Matthews judgment. We will do everything in our power to ensure that Gibraltarians can vote in the next European Parliamentary elections in 2004.

SRB-funded Housing

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the target was for SRB-funded housing units between 1997 and 2001; and what outputs were achieved for SRB-funded housing units in this period. [831]

Ms Keeble: Between April 1997 and March 2000, the number of dwellings completed or improved with support from the Single Regeneration Budget was 115,343 forecast and 152,753 achieved.

Output figures for 2000–01 will be collected centrally towards the end of 2001. Forecast and actual figures are total outputs from SRB schemes—that is, they include outputs from all funding sources. Forecast outputs may change as we agree and update delivery plans with partnerships each year.

Departmental Title Change Costs

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will list the expenditure incurred in introducing the title of his Department. [395]

Dr. Whitehead: My Department's costs have been very low as it makes extensive use of electronic templates, keeps low stocks of stationery and generally uses out of date stationery for purposes such as internal photocopying and notepads.

Costs incurred so far amount to £25,250, for changes to the logo templates, building signage, website and stationery for the central Department. This figure includes VAT. There may be some further minimal expenditure on building signs.

DEFENCE

MOD Police Agency

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what Key Targets have been set for the Ministry of Defence Police Agency for the financial year 2001–02. [1166]

Dr. Moonie: The following Key Targets have been set for the Ministry of Defence Police Agency:

Key Target 1

To achieve at least 60 per cent. patrol activity from those officers devoted to patrolling.

Key Target 2

To achieve a crime solving rate of at least 38 per cent.

Key Target 3

By 31 March 2002, to have developed a methodology, and associated targets, for measuring the MDPs contribution to security measures at those Defence establishments where it has a presence.

Key Target 4

By 31 March 2002, to produce a methodology to assess the quality and consistency of service delivery to customers of the Area Policing Teams and establish a baseline figure, which can inform the setting of targets in future years.

Key Target 5

To extend the efficiency index in respect of the business areas of Firearms, Marine Policing and Dog Handling, previously piloted in one OCU, to the remainder of the Force, setting baseline figures for future years of improvement.

Key Target 6

By 31 March 2002, to have implemented a Force Diversity Strategy, and within the overall recruitment to the Force to have recruited 20 per cent. women and 3 per cent. from minority ethnic communities.

Key Target 7

- (a) In England and Wales to submit at least 95 per cent. of prosecution files to the CPS within the timescales set out in the Manual of Guidance.
- (b) Submission of 80 per cent. of all Scottish crime/prosecution files to the Procurator Fiscal within a maximum of eight weeks of the offence being reported.
- (c) To match and if possible exceed the average performance of Home Department Forces for the Proportion of Prosecution files rated by the CPS as 'sufficient to proceed' or better.

Defence Diversification Agency

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what decision has been taken on the future of the Defence Diversification Agency following the recent period of consultation. [1167]

Dr. Moonie: We have been greatly encouraged by the response to the consultation on the future of the Defence Diversification Agency (DDA) and were particularly pleased by the many words of encouragement and support for the agency and its work. We continue to support a strong UK defence industry and recognise fully the significant role it plays in our wider industrial base. It was for these reasons we set up the DDA with three key aims: to extend technology and expertise within the defence sector to civilian use; to foster partnerships and joint development programmes, recognising that the civil sector has much of potential benefit to defence; and to inform and assist the defence industry's own diversification planning.

We intend that the DDA should continue to be a highly effective technology broker and achieve its aims in support of our overall defence diversification strategy. We believe that to do this successfully, the DDA must remain part of the defence community. But it cannot remain as part of the Defence Evaluation Research Agency (DERA) as now because of the planned public-private partnership. MOD's strategy of putting an increasing proportion of its research work outside of QinetiQ (as the new company will be known) and the Defence Scientific and Technology Laboratory (Dstl; the retained part of DERA) means that DDA would, in the longer term, be poorly

placed if wholly located in either. There is also the need to ensure commercial confidentiality and fairness to all defence research suppliers.

We have decided to bring the DDA into the Ministry of Defence head office. Existing DDA technology development managers will be transferred in their current locations to QinetiQ and Dstl. This recognises that QinetiQ and Dstl will remain our major suppliers of defence research for some time and, importantly, this option commanded the highest level of support from the DDA staff themselves. It will also have the benefit of allowing us to retain DDA's existing regional structure and thus ensuring that the existing close links are maintained with both the defence technology base and local business communities.

Once we have experience of how the DDA will operate in practice under the new structure, we will proceed with determining the appropriate composition and terms of reference for the Defence Diversification Council.

Overseas Recruitment

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the overseas recruitment missions that have taken place over the last six months and which are planned over the next year, indicating in each case (a) the country (i) visited and (ii) to be visited, (b) the number of overseas nationals (i) recruited and (ii) expected to be recruited and (c) the cost of the mission; and if he will make a statement. [228]

Mr. Ingram: Recruits to the UK armed forces must be British or Commonwealth citizens or Republic of Ireland nationals. Overseas recruitment missions are limited to those locations where numbers of expected applicants justify the effort.

A visit to St. Helena, which has generated some 40 applicants in each of the last two years, is currently taking place. Costs are not yet available.

An Army visit is being planned for later in the year to St. Lucia, from where 1,400 applications have been received. The cost of the visit is estimated at around £100,000.

No other recruiting visits have taken place in the last six months or are currently planned in the next 12 months.

World Cup 2006 Bid

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what requests were received by his Department regarding the use of Ministry of Defence vehicles during the bid to host the 2006 World Cup; [130]

(2) what use was made, and at what cost to public funds, of Ministry of Defence vehicles during the bid to host the 2006 World Cup. [129]

Mr. Ingram [holding answer 25 June 2001]: In mid-1999, the Ministry of Defence received a request from the FA World Cup 2006 Campaign Manager for the use of 32 (The Royal) Squadron aircraft to transport members of the FIFA Inspection Delegation Team for World Cup 2006 to various football grounds and airfields during their inspection of facilities, scheduled for October 1999.

Between 22 October 1999 and 25 October 1999, members of the FIFA Inspection Delegation Team for World Cup 2006 used aircraft of 32 (The Royal) Squadron for approximately 19 hours at a cost of £22,957.

Similarly, between 24 April 2000 and 10 June 2000, members of the FIFA Executive Committee used aircraft of 32 (The Royal) Squadron for approximately 17 hours at a cost of £60,879.

In each case, the costs were initially met by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which was subsequently reimbursed in full by the Football Association Campaign Team. There was therefore no cost incurred by public funds, save minimal invoicing and administrative costs.

TREASURY

Independent Insurance Company

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what discussions his Department has had with the Financial Services Authority during the past year about the publication of negative levels of cash flow and rising profits at Independent Insurance Company; [403]

(2) what discussions the Financial Services Authority has had with KPMG about (a) their role as external auditors of Independent Insurance Company and (b) their assessment of the adequacy of Independent Insurance Company's reserves; [402]

(3) if he will make a statement on the Serious Fraud Office's investigation into the Independent Insurance Company; [401]

(4) what regulations he proposes to instigate through the Financial Services Authority to ensure that all claims against an insurance company are properly entered into the company's accounting system; [420]

(5) on what dates officials from the Financial Services Authority met Mr. Michael Bright in his capacity as chief executive of Independent Insurance Company during the past 12 months; and what matters were discussed. [404]

Ruth Kelly: I understand that, following a referral on 18 June 2001 by the Financial Services Authority, the Director of the Serious Fraud Office has decided to investigate the affairs of the Independent Insurance Company Ltd.

It would be inappropriate for me to comment while there is an investigation in progress.

Company Cars

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received on the taxation of company cars; and what recent assessment he has made of the impact of taxation on company car use. [31]

Mr. Boateng: The new CO₂ emissions-based system of company car tax comes into effect from April 2002. It has been the subject of extensive consultation since proposals were first announced in Budget 1999. The Inland Revenue has received few recent representations.

The new system will provide an incentive to use cleaner cars. Extensive evaluation is planned through analysis of Inland Revenue data and by surveys of employers and employees.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Gambling Legislation

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans she has to reform gambling legislation; and if she will make a statement. [781]

Mr. Caborn: The Government announced an Independent Review of the law on gambling on 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 534W, and the Review Body's term of reference on 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 537W. We expect to receive its report shortly. We will give it careful consideration before deciding what changes to make to the legislation.

We will also take account of this report when we consider how to progress the regulatory reform proposals for modernising the methods of payment in gaming machines which were set out in a Home Office consultation paper in March 2001, and the proposals for changes to the law on bingo clubs which were considered in the last session by the Deregulation Committees of both Houses.

Playing Fields

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will publish the most up to date figures available on the number of playing fields sold by public bodies since 1 May 1997. [229]

Mr. Caborn: Information on the number of playing fields sold by public bodies since 1 May 1997 is not available. Sport England does, however, monitor the number of planning applications concerning playing fields in their role as statutory consultee.

The amendment to Section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act in October 1998, which was brought in to halt the previous Administration's policy of forcing schools to sell off playing fields, has introduced powers that require all state schools to seek consent for the sale of playing fields from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills. In making her decision my right hon. Friend will take into account a number of criteria including consultation with the community and user groups, whether the proceeds will be used for education or used to enhance or improve sports provision, and whether the remaining playing fields fully meet the needs for local schools and the community. My right hon. Friend the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment gave approval for the sale of 26.4 acres of school playing fields in England in 1998; 111.2 acres in 1999; and 60.9 acres in 2000. In many cases such approval will only involve the sale of part of a playing field (which will not affect the sporting use), or even no sale at all, as it is reused for another sporting use.

Sport England

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when she expects to appoint a new chief executive to Sport England. [231]

Mr. Caborn: It is for the Sport England Council to appoint its Chief Executive, subject to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's approval. I hope the process will be carried out speedily but the Council's overriding priority is to find the right person for the job.

Space for Sports and Arts Initiative

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when she expects to announce how schools can access the £750 million New Opportunities Fund budget under the Space for Sport and Arts Initiative. [230]

Mr. Caborn: Details of the application process for the £130 million Space for Sports and Arts initiative, which is jointly funded by DfES, DCMS, Sport England, the Arts Council for England and the New Opportunities Fund, were announced last autumn.

The New Opportunities Fund is currently consulting on how best to deliver its third round of funding initiatives, including the remainder of the £750.75 million PE and sport in schools initiative. A consultation document, "Delivering New Opportunities", is available from the Fund and organisations have until 3 September 2001 to submit comments.

The Fund expects to launch the PE and sport in schools initiative by the end of the 2001 calendar year and details of the application process will be announced at the launch.

Horse Racing

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when she expects to meet the Chairman of the British Horseracing Board to discuss the proposed abolition of the Horserace Betting Levy Board. [232]

Mr. Caborn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I expect to hold an early meeting with the Chairman of the British Horseracing Board so that he can brief us on the issues currently facing the racing industry.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when she expects to bring forward legislation for the privatisation of the Horserace Totalisation Board. [233]

Mr. Caborn: It remains the Government's intention to bring forward legislation when parliamentary time allows.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans she has to meet the Chairman of the Horserace Totaliser Board to discuss the proposed privatisation of the Tote. [234]

Mr. Caborn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I expect to hold an early meeting with Peter Jones, Chairman of the Tote, so that he can brief us on all of the current issues affecting the business.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when she expects to bring forward legislation to abolish the Horserace Betting Levy Board. [235]

Mr. Caborn: It remains our intention to bring forward legislation when parliamentary time allows. In the meantime we will continue to work closely with the Levy Board, the British Horseracing Board and the representatives of the betting industry to make the transition to fully commercial arrangements as smooth as it can be.

Lottery Funding

Andy Burnham: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures she is taking to target Lottery funding to where it is most needed. [1264]

Tessa Jowell: I will be announcing details of a new initiative on Wednesday 27 June 2001.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Civil Service

Joan Ryan: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what research the Cabinet Office has undertaken to measure progress in recognising and improving diversity in the civil service. [1223]

Mr. Leslie: I have today published two reports, one on the Civil Service Diversity Survey and the other a research report on "Equality in performance review in the Civil Service".

The diversity survey was conducted across the service to measure staff perception and experiences of working in the civil service in order to track progress on meeting objectives on civil service modernisation, diversity and equal opportunities. The research on equality in performance review was undertaken across six Departments, following an earlier research study on differences in performance markings between groups of staff.

The diversity survey identified the civil service as a good employer, with high ambitions as part of the civil service reform programme. The equality in performance review research suggests small but statistically significant differences in performance appraisal box markings between ethnic minority and white staff, disabled and able-bodied staff and men and women, and the research suggests underlying causes for this. These projects demonstrate the commitment of the civil service to continue to make progress to becoming truly diverse.

I have placed copies of both reports in the Libraries of both Houses.

Advertising

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list the advertising campaigns conducted by the Cabinet Office between 14 May and 8 June which were publicly funded. [396]

Mr. Leslie: Other than recruitment advertising conducted in the course of normal business, no advertising campaigns were conducted by the Cabinet Office between 14 May and 8 June 2001.

Special Advisers

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list the special advisers who (a) resigned and (b) remained in post in the period 8 May to 8 June inclusive. [764]

Mr. Leslie: I refer the hon. Member to my answer to the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) on 25 June 2001, *Official Report*, column 39W.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) if he will publish the names of special advisers indicating (a) the Department to which they are attached, (b) if they are paid or unpaid, (c) their date of appointment and (d) if they are political or expert special advisers; [766]

(2) what the current pay bands are for special advisers; and if he will list, broken down by Department, the number of special advisers who are in each pay band. [765]

Mr. Leslie: The detailed information requested is not yet available. Ministers are currently in the process of appointing their special advisers. In accordance with the Ministerial Code, all appointments must be approved by the Prime Minister.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the total amount of severance pay, net of any repayments, was for special advisers who have (a) been reappointed and (b) not been reappointed following the general election; and if he will make a statement. [769]

Mr. Leslie: I refer the hon. Member to my answer to the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) on 25 June 2001, *Official Report*, column 40W.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Competition Law

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what reforms to the Competition Commission she is proposing following the High Court ruling on the Interbrew and Bass merger; and if she will place a copy of the ruling in the Library. [752]

Miss Melanie Johnson [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The High Court's judgment on the case did not find fault with the reasoning or the proportionality of the remedy which the Commission recommended. The judgment held, however, that the Commission did not give Interbrew the opportunity to comment on one point in the Commission's reasoning on remedies. The Commission is carefully considering the judgment.

Government Regulation

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make it her policy to conduct an audit of the total cost of Government regulations to business and publish its findings. [742]

Nigel Griffiths [holding answer 25 June 2001]: International organisations and companies regularly carry out surveys of the regulatory environment in this and other countries.

Among such surveys are the OECD Economic Outlook published in December 1999, The Economist Intelligence Unit Global Country Forecast, published in April, the CBI

report "Creating a Europe that Works: A Study in Labour Market Flexibility", published in October 1999 and the GrowthPlus and Arthur Andersen report in January 2001.

Nuclear Power Stations

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment her Department has made of the economic case for new nuclear power stations. [741]

Mr. Wilson [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The Department continues to monitor developments in nuclear technology and the economics of new nuclear build as it does with other generation technologies. It is for generators to bring forward proposals for new power stations.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations her Department has made to the review being undertaken of the case for the Sellafield MOX plant; and if she will place copies of them in the Library. [753]

Mr. Wilson [holding answer 25 June 2001]: My Department made no representations to the public consultation on BNFL's revised economic case for the Sellafield MOX plant although at their request A. D. Little, the independent consultants engaged to review the economic case for the plant, spoke to some of my officials in the course of carrying out their work. The public consultation documents detail that my Department endorsed BNFL's new assessment of the MOX market.

EU Information and Consultation Directive

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will place in the Library a regulatory impact assessment of the EU Information and Consultation Directive as agreed at the Employment and Social Policy Council on 11 June. [300]

Ms Hewitt [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The DTI prepared a regulatory impact assessment on the Commission's original proposal. A copy was attached to EM 13099/98 submitted by the DTI on 15 January 1999. The directive has yet to be finally agreed as it now goes to the European Parliament for Second Reading. A revised regulatory impact assessment will be prepared when the Government consult in due course on the implementation of the directive in the UK.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what sanctions firms would face for breaching the provisions of the EU Information and Consultation Directive. [298]

Ms Hewitt [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The directive requires member states to determine the provisions for enforcement of the obligations. The Government will consult fully in due course on the implementation of the directive, including sanctions.

Post Office

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list those companies which have (a) applied to PostComm for a licence to operate postal services in competition with Royal Mail and (b) held discussions with the regulator about possible licence applications. [296]

Ms Hewitt [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The issue of postal licences is a matter for the Postal Services Commission (known as PostComm).

In addition to the licence granted to Consignia on 26 March, on 21 June 2001 PostComm announced that it had issued two interim licences to TNT (UK) and one to G3 Worldwide Mail (UK).

All licence proposals from PostComm are subject to a public consultation process. I understand that PostComm does not disclose information on licence applications or potential applications in advance of launching a public consultation.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on progress to implement the Universal Bank. [294]

Ms Hewitt [holding answer 25 June 2001]: Universal Banking Services are scheduled to come on stream in advance of the transfer of benefit payments to ACT in 2003. Consignia are working with their clients, potential suppliers and the banks towards this end.

Euro

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations have been received by the Assistant Director of her Department's Economics and Statistics Directorate concerning the exchange rate at which the UK could join the euro. [840]

Ms Hewitt: My Department regularly receives published material from analysts on a range of subjects.

Correspondence

David Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when she will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Walsall, North of 30 April regarding a constituent. [846]

Ms Hewitt: I understand that my hon. Friend the Minister for Industry and Energy replied to this letter on 19 June.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Rural Schools and Colleges

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many schools and colleges in rural areas have closed in each of the last five years. [64]

Mr. Timms: The table shows the number of schools in rural areas approved for closure in each of the last five years.

	Number
1997	4
1998	5
1999	2
2000	2
2001	0

Although a number of governing bodies of further education colleges in rural areas have been dissolved, in

each case the educational provision has continued by arrangement with another institution in the further or higher education sector.

Student Discount Card

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what arrangements her Department has made for the issue of a student's discount card; and on what terms. [110]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Following a competitive procurement process, on 8 May 2001 the Department announced that Capita is the preferred bidder to develop and deliver the Connexions Card through a public-private partnership.

The aim of the Connexions Card is to encourage wider participation and attainment. It will offer substantial discounts and other benefits to young people aged 16–19 who are in learning. It will use smart card technology to record their attendance, which will earn 'reward points'. These will be redeemable for discounts on goods and services on the High Street, on public transport and at leisure facilities.

Vocational GCSE Courses

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what additional resources will be made available to schools which decide to offer vocational GCSE courses. [931]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The Department will fund an extensive programme of support for schools and colleges, planned to begin in autumn 2001. Vocational GCSEs will build on the best of existing Part One GNVQs. The support programme will help all those offering the new qualification to prepare for its introduction. This will include staff training and support materials. In addition, a general programme aimed at increasing work related learning opportunities at Key Stage 4, with funding of £38 million, will be made available in 2002–04.

Key Stage Three

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if funding for the new Key Stage Three strategy will be paid directly to schools. [844]

Mr. Timms: In 2001–02 £85 million has been allocated through the Standards Fund programme to support the implementation of the first phase of the Key Stage Three National Strategy. £60 million of this will be directly delegated to schools to access training and professional development of teachers. £25 million will be used by local education authorities to support their schools' implementation of the Strategy.

Departmental Title Change Costs

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will list the expenditure incurred in introducing the title of her Department. [394]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The total expenditure incurred to date in introducing the title of the Department for Education and Skills is approximately £6,997.

This refers to changing external signage, website and e-mail registration and some limited stationery, to reflect the Department's new title.

AS Level Examinations

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will establish an independent inquiry into how the new system of AS level examinations was introduced this year and the lessons for the future. [771]

Mr. Timms: The fundamental principles of the advanced level reforms are based on extensive consultations and rigorous development. The Secretary of State has asked the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to review the new qualifications. An interim report is due by the middle of July.

HEALTH

Mental Health Services

15. Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the provision of mental health services in London. [496]

Jacqui Smith: In London and, indeed, elsewhere in the country, we have embarked on a radical programme of modernisation to improve access to effective treatment and care, reduce unfair variation, raise standards and provide quicker and more convenient mental health services.

Beta Interferon

16. Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to receive the NICE report on beta interferon. [497]

Dr. Murrisson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the decision by NICE on the availability of beta interferon for multiple sclerosis sufferers. [490]

Mr. Hutton: I refer the hon. Members to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) earlier today, *Official Report*, column 507.

GPs

17. Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement regarding early retirements and resignations by general practitioners. [498]

Mr. Hutton: We intend to announce further initiatives following the Primary Care Workforce Review.

General practitioners do an immensely valuable job under great pressure. Their work is very demanding and some early retirements and resignations are inevitable. However, the retention of experienced and skilled GPs is crucial to the successful delivery of a modernised NHS. In April, we therefore announced a £135 million package of measures to help recruitment and retention of GPs and nurses.

19. Mr. Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve the recruitment and retention of general practitioners. [500]

Mr. Hutton: Recruitment and retention of experienced and skilled general practitioners is crucial to successful delivery of the NHS Plan and to a modernised NHS.

We have announced a package of measures, including financial incentives and plans to enhance the career opportunities open to established GPs, to help improve the recruitment and retention of new and experienced GPs.

Heart Disease

18. Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to tackle heart disease. [499]

Yvette Cooper: Coronary heart disease is one of our key priority areas for action. The National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease sets standards for prevention, treatment and care. We are making available significant extra investment in programmes to prevent heart disease and services for treatment and care.

31. Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will fund the provision of the Cardionetics CNET 2000 heart monitor in all general practitioners' surgeries. [512]

Yvette Cooper: The National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease was published on 6 March 2000 setting out national standards for the provision of services for coronary heart disease. We have provided substantial increased funding for the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of heart disease and by 2003 we will be investing an extra £230 million a year in heart services. An additional £120 million of capital funding has also been provided over the two years to 2002. It is a matter for health authorities and primary care trusts working with their local networks of cardiac care to commission services including equipment using the best available evidence to meet the NSF. At this time there is insufficient data to recommend the widespread use of Cardionetics CNET 2000 in primary care.

The Department will continue to monitor all research.

Strokes

21. Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he proposes to make treatment of strokes an additional priority for the NHS. [502]

Mr. Hutton: The National Service Framework for Older People, published in March, confirmed the high priority given to the reduction of stroke in the population and effective treatment and rehabilitation of those who have had a stroke. Based on evidence of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness it describes a service model for integrated stroke services and sets milestones for every general hospital which cares for older people with stroke to have made plans by April 2002 to introduce a specialist stroke service from 2004.

34. Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on stroke services. [515]

Jacqui Smith: Stroke has a major impact on people's lives and affects thousands of people every year. It is essential that we provide better services for those people who have had a stroke, that is why there are key proposals within the National Service Framework (NSF) for Older People published on 27 March 2001.

It spells out what good clinical care is; how to prevent stroke and what forms relevant treatment, care and rehabilitation for those who have had a stroke.

Maternity Services

22. Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to improve maternity services. [503]

Yvette Cooper: We are improving maternity services through the development of a major new National Service Framework for Children, including maternity services to set national standards of care. We are also investing an additional £100 million to improve and modernise maternity facilities and have set up a Maternity and Neonatal Workforce Working Group to make recommendations on work force issues and best models for the configuration of maternity services.

NHS (Private Finance)

23. Paul Holmes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent studies his Department has commissioned, undertaken and reviewed concerning the use of private finance within the NHS. [504]

Mr. Hutton: The Department of Health reviews all PFI projects through the Business Case approval system. To be approved, the Business Case must clearly demonstrate that, overall, the private finance option is better value for money when compared to the publicly funded alternative, the Public Sector Comparator (PSC), and that it provides improved facilities for the NHS. NHS Trusts are required to monitor performance throughout the lifetime of the PFI contract.

Because of PFI, six major new hospitals have opened and another 17 are under construction, representing capital investment in the NHS of over £2 billion.

Cancer Services

25. Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve cancer services. [506]

Yvette Cooper: We are investing additional funding in priority areas. £280 million is available for improvements to cancer services this year, rising to £570 million by 2003–04, and we are reforming the way in which cancer care is delivered through the implementation of the NHS Cancer Plan.

Junior Doctors' Hours

26. Dr. Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are the average hours worked by junior doctors in the NHS. [R] [507]

Mr. Hutton: We are working hard to bring junior doctors' hours down without damaging patient care so that doctors are safe, healthy and able to give their best to the NHS.

At 30 September 2000, 62 per cent. of junior doctors satisfied the New Deal hours and rest requirements of working no more than 56 hours a week on average.

Data showing the position at 31 March 2001 will be published shortly.

Haemophilia Services

29. Paddy Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to meet the Haemophilia Society to discuss service improvements. [510]

Yvette Cooper: There are no plans for such a meeting, nor have the Haemophilia Society requested one. However, departmental officials are meeting members of the Haemophilia Alliance, which includes the Haemophilia Society, on Friday 13 July to discuss the Alliance's draft National Service Specification for Haemophilia and Related Conditions.

Health Professions Council

30. Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to implement the order that will create the Health Professions Council. [511]

Mr. Hutton: We published the draft order to create the Health Professions Council on 2 April 2001. The statutory consultation period ends on 1 July 2001. We shall then finalise the order taking account of issues raised during consultation and, subject to the legislative timetable and the approval of Parliament, we expect the order to be made by the end of December 2001. The Health Professions Council, which already exists in shadow form, will be formally established from 1 April 2002.

Operating Department Practitioners

32. Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made on introducing a registration scheme for operating department practitioners. [513]

Mr. Hutton: A registration scheme for operating department practitioners has been in effect since 6 April 2000.

Waiting Lists

33. Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what priority measures he has set in place to help reduce hospital waiting lists. [514]

Mr. Hutton: In managing waiting lists, we expect the National Health Service to treat patients according to their clinical priority and need. We have issued very clear guidance to the NHS on access to secondary care services. The first line of this guidance stated that:

"clinical priority must be the main determinant of when patients are seen as outpatients or admitted as inpatients".

We have repeatedly made it clear that those patients who are in greatest need continue to be treated first.

Ambulances

35. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the introduction of in-cab mapping systems in ambulances. [516]

Ms Bleas: We recognise that satellite navigation equipment for ambulance vehicles can help crews to pinpoint addresses and speed up response times, particularly to life threatening emergencies. We have, therefore, made £3.4 million available for emergency ambulance services to equip all of their front line vehicles with in-cab mapping systems by March 2002 at the latest.

This investment will help ambulance services to meet their target to respond to 75 per cent. of category A calls within eight minutes.

Health Visitors

36. Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent investigation his Department has made into disparities across health authorities in the provision of health visitors per 100 children under the age of five years. [517]

Mr. Hutton: The Department has not made any recent comparative investigations across health authorities into the provision of health visitors based on the number of children under five years of age. Local health improvement programmes include an assessment of the health needs of local populations, and the funding of primary care group investment plans is aligned with priorities identified by the local health improvement plan. It is the responsibility of local health providers to plan their own staffing requirements to meet local need accordingly. Primary care groups and trusts have huge potential to improve people's health and prevent illness, which includes providing appropriate health visiting services.

Hospices

38. Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for the future funding of hospices. [519]

Yvette Cooper: The NHS Cancer Plan set out our commitment to increase National Health Service investment in specialist palliative care by £50 million by 2004. Health authority allocations in 2001–02 included a total of £255 million to support the first year of local implementation of the NHS Cancer Plan Priorities for this year include the development of costed strategic plans for palliative care.

Cancer networks are currently developing detailed service delivery plans, which will identify current position and set out action plans for further development across all services including palliative care. These will be completed by the autumn.

Matters relating to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are for the devolved Administrations.

Minor Injuries Unit (Camborne)

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for a minor injuries unit in the Redruth Camborne area. [501]

Ms Blears: It is the responsibility of the local health community to plan local services. I understand that West of Cornwall Primary Care Trust are developing plans to create a minor injuries unit at Redruth and Camborne Community Hospital.

Dementia Care

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate his Department has made of the availability of home-based and residential-based specialist dementia care services. [508]

Jacqui Smith: The Audit Commission report "Forget Me Not" published in January 2000 found that the availability of support to people with dementia both at home and in residential care was variable. The National Service Framework for Older People, published in March, has addressed many of these concerns. The NSF has set out clear standards and service models to improve access to and improve the quality of mental health services for older people.

Primary Care

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve primary care services. [509]

Mr. Hutton: We have provided PCT/Gs with £100 million to develop and invest in new ways of working that further improve the range and quality of services delivered to patients. In addition we have committed substantial further resources in the years ahead to extend and improve access to primary care services. We have created Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) as organisations that bring together the skills and talents of general practice and community professionals to secure and provide responsive high quality services to their population.

Nursing Care

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will announce the details of the arrangements to provide free nursing care to elderly people in residential and nursing homes. [518]

Jacqui Smith: Detailed draft guidance on how we plan to implement free nursing care will be issued for consultation shortly.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to reply to the letters to him dated 8 May from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, on regard to Mr. R. McMorris. [343]

Ms Blears: A reply to my right hon. Friend's letter dated 8 May was sent on 25 June.

Residential and Nursing Care

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will set out his plans for costs limiting expenditure on the provision of free nursing care as provided for in the Health and Social Care Act 2001. [180]

Jacqui Smith [holding answer 25 June 2001]: Detailed draft guidance on how we plan to implement free nursing care will be issued for consultation shortly.

NHS (Surrey)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people were waiting for treatment at East Surrey Hospital, together with the average length of waiting time in (a) May 1997 and (b) May 2001. [146]

Mr. Hutton [holding answer 25 June 2001]: East Surrey Healthcare and Crawley Horsham National Health Service Trusts merged in 1998–99 to form the Surrey and Sussex NHS Trust. As waiting times data are collected on

an aggregated trust basis only and not on a hospital basis, data are not available for East Surrey Hospital. The information for these trusts are given in the table.

Trust	Total inpatient waiting list	Average (median) waiting times (months)
June 1997 ¹		
East Surrey Healthcare	4,801	3.49
Crawley Horsham	4,262	5.21
Combined data	9,063	4.32

April 2001		
Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust	8,377	5.07

¹ Monthly returns have only been collected since March 1998

Note:

East Surrey Healthcare and Crawley Horsham merged to form one trust (Surrey and Sussex Healthcare) in 1998–99.

Data for the two trusts East Surrey Healthcare and Crawley Horsham for June 1997 have been combined in order to provide comparable data.

Source:

KH07 quarterly return/monthly waiting times returns

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the state of negotiations between Surrey and Sussex NHS Trust and a private nursing home provider concerning the future of Oxted Hospital. [144]

Ms Blears [holding answer 25 June 2001]: Negotiations are still ongoing between Surrey and Sussex Healthcare National Health Service Trust and a preferred private sector provider. An announcement will be made by the trust following the outcome of these negotiations.

Waiting Times

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list his Department's targets with respect to (a) average and (b) maximum waiting times for (i) in-patient appointments, (ii) in-patient treatment, (iii) out-patient appointments and (iv) out-patient treatment. [389]

Mr. Hutton [holding answer 25 June 2001]: As part of the National Health Service Plan, the NHS is working towards reducing the current maximum in-patient wait of 18 months to 15 months by March 2002 and reducing the out-patient wait of over six months by March 2002. These targets are part of a staged reduction in waiting times, with in-patient waiting times continuing to fall from 18, to 15, to 12, nine then ultimately six months by 2005. The maximum out-patient waiting time will fall to three months by 2005.

No targets exist for average waiting times; however, as the NHS Plan targets are implemented, all patients will benefit from shorter waiting times, provided that the Government can recruit the extra staff, and the NHS makes the necessary reforms.

Mixed-sex Wards

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will specify the target date for the ending of (a) mixed-sex wards and (b) Nightingale wards. [434]

Ms Blears [holding answer 25 June 2001]: Our policy is to eliminate mixed-sex accommodation in 95 per cent. of health authorities by the end of 2002. The vast majority of National Health Service trusts are on target to achieve our objectives by the target date.

We are also committed to eliminating Nightingale wards for all older people. £120 million was announced in the Budget, and this will be used over three years to achieve our aims by March 2004.

NHS Vacancies

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many GP posts are vacant; and how many have been vacant for more than three months. [378]

Mr. Hutton [holding answer 25 June 2001]: This information is not available in the form requested. Available information is contained in the Department of Health publication—"General Practitioner Recruitment, Retention and Vacancy Survey 2000 for England and Wales". Copies are available in the Library or alternatively at www.doh.gov.uk/stats/gprsvsurvey.htm.

Special Advisers

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the special advisers in his Department, together with their date of appointment and their responsibilities; which of them are authorised to speak to the media; and if he will make a statement. [436]

Mr. Milburn [holding answer 25 June 2001]: I have appointed Professor Paul Corrigan and Darren Murphy as special advisers. Areas of responsibility have yet to be finalised. In its response to the Sixth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the Government committed themselves to a new Code of Conduct for Special Advisers and a revised Model Contract. The new Code and Contract apply to all appointments of special advisers made after the Election.

Severalls Hospital, Colchester

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made in the sale of the former Severalls hospital at Colchester; and if he will make a statement. [227]

Jacqui Smith [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The sale of the first phase of the parcels of land in Colchester, near to the Severalls hospital, has been completed. Further phases are currently being marketed as part of a proposed public-private partnership to achieve the National Health Service Plan's objective of a one-off sale of surplus property to help fund the NHS modernisation programme.

Officials are continuing to work closely with the local planning authority regarding the development proposals for the site.

Arthritis

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to allow new drugs to be used in the treatment of arthritis. [779]

Mr. Hutton: Infliximab (Remicade) and etanercept (Enbrel) are currently being appraised by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). Until NICE has

completed its appraisal, National Health Service bodies have been advised to use their existing arrangements to determine local policies based on the publicly available evidence. NICE expects to issue guidance in October 2001 unless there are appeals against its determination.

Care Home Standards

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the amount of space required to transfer a patient from a bed, couch or trolley, allowing manoeuvres, to an assisted bath under Standard 21.3 of his "National Minimum Standards for Care Homes"; [383]

(2) what estimate he has made of the costs of implementing Standard 22.2 of the "National Minimum Standards for Care Homes"; and how many homes currently without a passenger lift will have to install one. [384]

Jacqui Smith [holding answer 25 June 2001]: National Minimum Standards will ensure that care provision is fit for purpose and meets the assessed needs of residents.

Where residents cannot walk to an assisted bath, sufficient space must be provided to allow safe and manageable transfer from any means used to transport residents to the bath.

The need for provision of particular facilities such as passenger lifts and the costs associated with their installation will vary from home to home.

It will be for the National Care Standards Commission to decide, in the particular circumstances of each home, whether the home conforms to all the standards necessary to meet the assessed needs of the residents.

Wythenshawe Hospital

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will announce his decision on the future of the transplant unit at Wythenshawe hospital. [845]

Mr. Hutton: We will issue a document soon setting out our proposals for the future of the National Cardiothoracic Transplant Service including the transplant unit at Wythenshawe hospital in Manchester. The final decision on the siting of the four national units will be made in the light of comments received and in time for the necessary changes to be completed by April 2002.

Liquid-based Cytology

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health who will hold the annual budget for liquid-based cytology consumables in England and Wales referred to in paragraph 14 of NICE's appraisal of liquid-based cytology. [303]

Yvette Cooper: Three pilot sites have now begun using liquid-based cytology (LBC) techniques as part of the National Health Service cervical screening programme in England, as recommended by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). The United Kingdom National Screening Committee, which advises Ministers on all aspects of screening policy, is sponsoring the pilot. The LBC arm of the pilot will report in early 2002, and will be reappraised by NICE in May 2002.

If recommended by NICE, LBC will be rolled out across the NHS cervical screening programme over two to three years. Details of the funding mechanisms will be determined nearer the time in the light of NICE recommendations and the experience of the pilot.

Health Service (Wales)

Hywel Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the National Assembly concerning the use of private management in the health service in Wales. [485]

Mr. Milburn: None.

NHS/Local Government Liaison

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what priority will be given in the NHS Plan to improving links with local government in environmental health, housing and transport. [489]

Ms Blears: The NHS Plan builds on the Government's existing major programme to improve public health, address health inequalities and tackle the deep-rooted causes of ill health, including environmental factors. The NHS plan recognises that the role of the NHS, working in partnership across the community, is to prevent as well as treat sickness and ill health.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Veterinary Practices

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many veterinary practices there were in the UK on (a) 1 May 1997, (b) 1 May 1998, (c) 1 May 1999, (d) 1 May 2000 and (e) 1 May 2001; and what estimate she has made of the number of veterinary practices that will be operating on 1 May 2002. [345]

Mr. Morley: I am informed by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) that the number of veterinary practices registered with them on the dates specified were as follows:

As at 1 May	Number
1997	2,042
1998	2,077
1999	2,123
2000	2,174
2001	2,312

They further inform me that veterinary practices are not under any obligation to register with the RCVS, so it is possible that these figures do not represent the true number of practices in the UK.

The RCVS is unable to estimate the number of veterinary practices that will be operating on 1 May 2002.

Livestock Movements

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations

she has received concerning the 20-day standstill rule; what proposals she has to change it; and if she will make a statement. [32]

Mr. Morley: We have received a very large number of representations from a wide range of organisations. These responses are being taken into account in considering a range of issues surrounding the movement of livestock both during, and after, the current foot and mouth disease outbreak. An announcement on our conclusions will be made in due course.

Pick-your-own Businesses

Mr. Curry: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will issue guidance on the operation of pick-your-own businesses in areas affected by foot and mouth disease outbreaks. [265]

Mr. Morley: Pick-your-own businesses that fall within an infected area and are in close proximity to livestock will be affected by the foot and mouth restrictions. A veterinary risk assessment is being prepared as a matter of urgency and will be placed on the Department's website <http://www.defra.gov.uk/>.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Departmental Title Change Costs

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list the expenditure incurred in introducing the title of his Department. [393]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: To date, the net expenditure incurred in introducing the title of the new Department is approximately £7,200.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Visas

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which of his Ministers has responsibility for visa applications. [253]

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw).

US-Russian Relations

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what are the implications for UK foreign policy of the recent meeting between President Bush and President Putin; and if he intends to raise the issue of human rights abuses in Chechnya with them. [735]

Peter Hain: We welcome the dialogue between Presidents Bush and Putin at their Summit in Ljubljana on 16 June. A constructive US/Russia relationship is important for a range of international issues. The UK will continue to pursue a policy of critical engagement with Russia—President Bush's approach confirmed that open discussion combined with frank talking on areas of difference can yield results. We will continue to raise our concerns about human rights abuses in Chechnya at every appropriate meeting with Russia.

Sino-US Relations

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's position regarding (a) Sino-US relations and (b) Sino-Taiwanese relations. [255]

Mr. MacShane: We believe it is important that the US and China maintain a constructive dialogue. The US and China have strong trade and economic links which should be enhanced by Chinese accession to the World Trade Organisation. We monitor developments across the Taiwan Straits closely. We believe that the future of Taiwan is a matter for the Chinese people on both sides of the Taiwan Straits to decide among themselves. We look to both sides to pursue a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question through negotiation.

Overseas Visits

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit (a) Sierra Leone, (b) China and (c) Zimbabwe. [256]

Mr. Straw: I am currently considering proposals for visits to a number of countries. The House will be informed when decisions have been made.

Arms Trade

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in the House of Lords will be responsible for arms trade to (a) Indonesia and (b) Sierra Leone. [736]

Mr. Straw: Individual Ministers handle export licence issues in respect of the countries within their geographical area of responsibility. The Minister responsible for Indonesia is my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw). The Minister responsible for Sierra Leone is Baroness Amos. My hon. Friend the Member for Exeter also has additional responsibility within the FCO for overall policy on arms export licensing.

Tibet

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has had made to the Chinese Government about human rights abuses in Tibet. [252]

Mr. MacShane: The British Government remain deeply concerned about the human rights situation in Tibet. It is a focus of our human rights engagement with the Chinese authorities both at ministerial level and through the regular UK/China and EU/China human rights dialogues. We use these dialogues to raise a wide range of concerns including key issues such as the freedom of religion, expression and association, the harsh treatment of dissidents and the erosion of Tibetan culture and traditional practices. We also raise individual cases of concern including that of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama's choice as the 11th Panchen Lama.

We continue to urge the Chinese authorities to enter into a sustained dialogue with the Dalai Lama on a political solution for Tibet.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the areas of responsibility that have (a) been transferred from his Department to other Departments and (b) been transferred to his Department from other Departments since 8 June. [257]

Mr. Straw: The information is as follows:

- (a) None.
- (b) None.

Ministerial Responsibilities

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the responsibilities of each Minister in his Department. [258]

Mr. Straw: Responsibilities among FCO Ministers are as follows:

Peter Hain: European Union, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Former Soviet Union, United Nations, Environment.

Baroness Symons: British Trade Policy and Promotion, North America, Britain Abroad Task Force.

Ben Bradshaw: Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, South East Asia, International Security, Drugs and Counter-terrorism, Visas.

Denis MacShane: South-East Europe, Latin America, North East Asia and the Pacific, Public Diplomacy, Cultural Relations, Central Administration and Resources.

Baroness Amos: Africa, Commonwealth, Caribbean, Overseas Territories, Consular issues, Personnel.

Taiwan

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations Her Majesty's Government have made to (a) the World Health Organisation, (b) the United Nations and (c) the European Union in support of Taiwan's appeal to be granted observer status to the World Health Organisation; and if he will make a statement. [352]

Peter Hain: HMG have not made any representations to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations or the European Union on this matter. I understand that the Director General of the WHO has discretion to confer observer status on a non-state entity where its participation would be non-controversial. The Director General has not done so to date but it remains open to the Taiwanese to continue to pursue this.

National Economic Security

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he takes to ensure that the responsibility placed on MI6 to protect the economic well-being of the country is not discharged in such a way as to (a) benefit big business at the expense of small business and (b) undermine the rights of pressure groups and individuals to pursue peacefully their political ends. [220]

Mr. Straw [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The Secret Intelligence Service carries out its functions under the Intelligence Services Act 1994 under my authority. I take my responsibilities in this respect very seriously. Any powers exercised by the Secretary of State under the Intelligence Services Act 1994, or under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 are scrutinised by

independent judicial commissioners who make Annual Reports to Parliament. The finance, administration and policy of the security and intelligence services, including the Secret Intelligence Service, is overseen by the Intelligence and Security Committee. I would draw attention to the committee's Annual Report for 1996 (presented to Parliament in February 1997, Cm 3574) in which the committee

"came to the overall conclusion that intelligence work in support of economic well-being is an important, valuable and, on the evidence we have taken, properly conducted area of the Agencies' activities".

Scottish Executive

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's policy is on the Scottish Executive's commitment to direct access to the European Court of Justice included in the Political Declaration of the Constitutional Regions signed on 28 May. [437]

Peter Hain: We welcome all contributions to the debate on the Future of Europe.

In signing the Declaration, the Scottish Executive did not commit itself to a proposal to give regional governments direct access to the European Court of Justice. Instead, it supported the joint views of the co-signatories that consideration should be given to this topic, along with others, in the broad debate on the Future of Europe.

Final decisions will be taken by member states at the next Intergovernmental Conference in 2004. The Scottish Executive will, of course, be involved in formulating the UK position.

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have been held between Her Majesty's Government and the Scottish Executive concerning direct Scottish Executive access to the European Court of Justice. [438]

Peter Hain: HMG work closely and in co-operation with the Scottish Executive on all EU policy issues in line with the Memorandum of Understanding and the concordats on International Relations and European Union Policy Issues.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Work Permits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many work permits were issued (a) last year and (b) in the period since 1 January; and if he will make a statement. [947]

Angela Eagle: In the 2000 calendar year, a total of 102,174 work permit applications were approved. Between 1 January and 31 May this year, 56,118 work permit applications were approved.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many work permits have been issued (a) under the fast track scheme for shortage occupations since the introduction of this scheme and (b) for shortage occupations expressed as a proportion of the total; and if he will make a statement. [949]

Angela Eagle: Information is not available in the form requested. Between 1 October 1999 and 31 May 2001, the number of approvals made in respect of skills shortage work permit applications was 44,413. This figure represents 25 per cent. of the total number of work permit approvals made during the same period.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Government's plans to introduce a green card scheme to govern the entry of workers into the UK. [954]

Angela Eagle: The United Kingdom has longstanding work permit arrangements that enable employers to recruit people from overseas. The system has recently undergone a comprehensive and successful review to ensure that it responds quickly and effectively to labour market needs.

This Government propose further to develop the work permit system in order to ensure that it continues to serve the overall needs of the economy as part of a coherent migration policy.

No decisions have been taken yet on the precise nature of any changes.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many work permits have been issued to IT professionals in (a) the last year and (b) in the latest period for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [948]

Angela Eagle: In the 2000 calendar year, 18,259 work permit applications were approved in respect of information technology professionals. Between 1 January and 31 May this year, 10,700 approvals have been granted for that category of worker. Like most developed countries, the United Kingdom continues to experience a shortage of some skills within the information technology sector. The United Kingdom work permit system has the flexibility to respond quickly to emerging shortages.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the issuing of work permits for seasonal agricultural employment. [950]

Angela Eagle: The United Kingdom has a long-standing Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Scheme which enables non-European Economic Area students between the ages of 18 and 25 who are in full-time education to enter the United Kingdom to do seasonal agricultural work. The annual quota was raised in 2000 from 10,000 to 15,200.

There are no present plans to issue work permits for agricultural workers. However, we will wish to consider the place of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Scheme in the context of any proposed changes to the work permit system.

Religious Discrimination

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on tackling religious discrimination. [951]

Angela Eagle: The Government are tackling religious discrimination in a number of ways, taking account of the two research reports on religious discrimination published earlier this year and responses to them.

The Government are committed to implementing the Article 13 European Community Employment Directive outlawing discrimination in employment and training on grounds that include religion by 2 December 2003. The Government will consult on this and related good practice guidance in due course.

The Census Act 1921 was amended to include a question on religious identity in this year's census. This will provide central and local government with reliable data on our faith communities, which will help inform the planning and delivery of services sensitive to the needs of faith communities. The Human Rights Act 1998 also provides protection against religious discrimination.

But legislation alone is not enough, as the research participants recognised. They favoured a comprehensive approach in which education, training and a greater effort to teach more in schools about the diversity of faith would all play an important part. We are looking at how best to do this.

The research reports will help not only to inform policy, but to raise awareness of people's experience of religious discrimination, and of the sensitive and sometimes complex issues involved within the options for tackling it.

Equal Treatment

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the incorporation into UK law of EU Directive 2000/43/EC on the principle of equal treatment on the grounds of race or ethnic origin. [953]

Angela Eagle: The Directive was agreed unanimously at the European Social Affairs Council on 6 June 2000, and was published in the Official Journal of the European Communities on 19 July 2000. We are working to implement the Directive by 2003. Implementation will require a number of mainly technical amendments to the Race Relations Act 1976.

Corporate Killing

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce an offence of corporate killing; and if he will make a statement. [951]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The Government remain committed to the introduction of an offence of corporate killing. We will honour our manifesto commitment to reform the law to make provisions against corporate manslaughter. We intend to publish final proposals for the reform of the law on involuntary manslaughter as soon as we have completed consideration of the responses to the consultation exercise.

We are determined to bring forward clear and workable legislation that will hold undertakings to account for serious wrongdoing and will legislate when parliamentary time allows.

Suicides (Winchester Prison)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list (a) suicide rates for each of the last five years at Winchester prison and (b) the national prison average for the same period. [250]

Beverley Hughes: The rates and numbers of self-inflicted prisoner deaths at Winchester prison and establishments in England and Wales as a whole, are set out in the table. The Prison Service's new suicide prevention strategy targets prisoners most at risk in the types of prisons, mostly locals, where the risk of suicides is highest. There is an early focus on pilots in five establishments—including Winchester—with a range of changes that include physical improvements to reception and induction areas and more first night support centres and safe cells.

The number and rates of self-inflicted deaths for Winchester prison and all establishments in England and Wales between 1 January 1997 and 21 June 2001

Year	Winchester prison		England and Wales	
	Number	Rate per 100,000	Number	Rate per 100,000
1997	2	349	68	111
1998	5	710	82	125
1999	2	406	91	140
2000	4	984	81	125
2001	2	383	29	—

¹ Rate based on average year population up to 31 May 2001

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average time taken for asylum applicants to receive an initial decision on their asylum application is; and if he will make a statement. [175]

Angela Eagle [holding answer 25 June 2001]: Information is not available for the whole of 2000. However, the most recent available data based on the period October to December 2000 show that the average time taken for asylum applicants to receive an initial decision on their asylum applications is 14 months. Average times for 1991 to 1999 (based on the period January to December) ranged between 16 and 35 months.

Immigration Officers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average annual cost is of employing an immigration officer; and if he will make a statement. [176]

Angela Eagle [holding answer 26 May 2001]: The current pay range for Immigration Officers (IO) is:

	£
National	16,936–21,381
London and Gatwick	16,365–21,820

Immigration Officers also receive shift disturbance allowance at 16.5 per cent. of salary and London Weighting dependent on location. Other allowances, e.g. for languages, are payable on an individual basis. The Immigration Service also incurs both Employers National Insurance Contributions and Superannuation costs. Additional pay-related costs include overtime, premium payments for weekend and public holiday working.

During the financial year 2000–01, the average annual pay related cost for Immigration Officers was £32,370, comprising £28,500 pay and allowances (including

shift disturbance allowance, National Insurance and Superannuation, £872 overtime and £2,996 premia payments).

As the number of Immigration Officers employed increases in line with agreed recruitment, average costs will fall reflecting lower salaries for junior staff and reduced average overtime and premia payments.

Ministerial Responsibilities

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the responsibilities of each Minister in his Department. [290]

Mr. Blunkett [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The responsibilities of Home Office Ministers are as follows:

John Denham: Minister of State for Crime Reduction, Policing and Community Safety. Minister for Children and Young People.

Bob Ainsworth: Parliamentary Under-Secretary responsible for anti-drugs co-ordination and organised crime and support to Minister of State for Crime Reduction, Policing and Community Safety.

The right hon. Keith Bradley: Minister of State for Criminal Justice, Sentencing and Law Reform.

Beverley Hughes: Parliamentary Under-Secretary responsible for Community and Custodial Provision and support to Minister of State for Criminal Justice, Sentencing and Law Reform.

Jeff Rooker: Minister of State for Citizenship and Immigration.

Angela Eagle: Parliamentary Under-Secretary responsible for community and race equality. Also Minister for Europe and support to Minister of State for Citizenship and Immigration.

As Home Secretary, I have overall responsibility for the work of the Home Office and particular responsibility for policy on security, terrorism, expenditure issues and family policies. I also chair the Civil Contingencies Committee.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Land Registry

Derek Twigg: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he will publish the report of the Quinquennial Review of Her Majesty's Land Registry. [1103]

Mr. Wills: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has today published the Report on the Quinquennial Review of HM Land Registry. HM Land Registry is a Government Department established in 1862 for which the Lord Chancellor is the responsible Minister. In 1990 it was launched as an executive agency and granted Trading Fund status in 1993.

I would like to thank the reviewer, Andrew Edwards CB, for conducting such a thorough review and for his most comprehensive Report. The Review has found that public confidence in land and property ownership depends on HM Land Registry's ability to guarantee title and to deliver its services impartially. For these reasons the Review finds that HM Land Registry should remain in the public sector as a Government Department, an executive agency and a trading fund; while continuing the significant amount of work in partnership with the private sector that it currently undertakes. The Government accept the Review's conclusions on HM Land Registry's

continued public sector status and the Lord Chancellor has now asked officials to take forward the review of HM Land Registry's Framework Document.

I note that the Review makes wide-ranging proposals for the enhancement of the Land Register and for improvement in the operation of the property market in England and Wales. It also provides a timely contribution to the debate on the future of e-conveyancing and land registration services. While some of the recommendations are consistent with programmes of reform already under way, others are more radical and wide-ranging. The Lord Chancellor has therefore asked officials from his Department and HM Land Registry to examine the recommendations carefully with officials from other interested Government Departments. Together with colleagues, we will wish to assess the more wide-ranging and radical proposals, including, in particular, their implications for, and impact on, other Government

initiatives, before reaching conclusions on the best way forward in this important area. The Lord Chancellor intends to publish in the autumn a plan for taking forward the wider recommendation contained in the Report once this more detailed consideration has been completed.

Copies of the Report and a summary of its recommendations have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

European Convention on Human Rights

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the Government's policy toward Protocol 12 of the European Convention on Human Rights. [952]

Mr. Wills: The Government have no present plans to sign and ratify Protocol 12, but will monitor its interpretation by the European Court of Human Rights.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 27 June 2001

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Missing Israeli Service Men

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the representations he has made on behalf of missing Israeli service men. [834]

Mr. Bradshaw: This Government condemn hostage taking under any circumstances. On 3 May my right hon. Friend the previous Foreign Secretary and my hon. Friend the Member for Cuninghame, North (Mr. Wilson) met the families of the three soldiers kidnapped by Hizballah on 7 October and the reservist Colonel kidnapped on 4 October. The Government are doing what they can to help and have raised these cases, and continue to do so, with the relevant countries in the region pressing particularly for access to the hostages for the ICRC. We strongly support all efforts to secure the release of all hostages, particularly efforts led by the United Nations Secretary General.

Entry Clearance

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what guidance he has given on the use of ministerial discretion in overturning the decisions of entry clearance officers overseas; and if he will place a copy of the guidance in the Library. [801]

Mr. Bradshaw: Entry Clearance Officers (ECOs) consider entry clearance applications and apply the Immigration Rules to determine whether to grant or refuse entry clearance. In exceptional circumstances, an FCO Minister may exercise his/her discretion to overturn an ECO's decision, if the Minister considers that in fact the requirements of the Immigration Rules have, or have not, been met. This discretion extends only to decisions made in accordance with the Immigration Rules. The exercise of discretion to make a decision outside the Rules is only undertaken by a Home Office Minister.

EU Enlargement

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if firm dates have been set for EU membership for (a) Cyprus and (b) Turkey. [307]

Peter Hain: No firm date has been set for the accession of any candidate country to the EU. However, the Gothenburg European Council agreed that, provided progress towards meeting the accession criteria continues at an unabated pace, the road map for enlargement should make it possible to complete negotiations by the end of 2002 for those candidates that are ready. The objective is that they should participate in the European Parliament elections of 2004 as members. The Government fully support this approach.

Both Turkey and Cyprus are candidates for the EU. Cyprus is well advanced in its negotiations, having provisionally closed negotiations in 22 out of the 31 chapters of the EU's *acquis communautaire*. Turkey has yet to begin negotiations, as it has not fulfilled the Copenhagen political criteria (covering issues such as human rights, the rule of law and respect for and protection of minorities). The Government look forward to further progress by Turkey, in line with the priorities set out in the EU's Accession Partnership with Turkey.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has for discussions with his counterparts from (a) Latvia, (b) Lithuania, (c) Bulgaria, (d) Estonia, (e) Romania, (f) the Czech Republic, (g) Slovakia, (h) Poland and (i) Hungary on EU enlargement. [314]

Peter Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met a number of his counterparts from the Central European EU applicant countries at the European Council meeting in Gothenburg on 15–16 June. The Government attach the utmost importance to the enlargement of the EU and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I intend to expand our dialogue with the applicants in the coming months. Programmes of inward and outward visits are under discussion.

Balkans

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he has a strategy to achieve peace in (a) Kosovo, (b) Macedonia and (c) the Balkans in general; and if he will make a statement. [308]

Mr. MacShane: The UK is working closely with its partners and key international organisations to bring peace and stability to the Balkans.

In Kosovo, we fully support the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) in their efforts, in accordance with UN Security Council resolution 1244, to secure the establishment of a democratic, tolerant, multi-ethnic society and to achieve lasting security for all of Kosovo's population. Elections to a Kosovo Assembly in November 2001 will deliver the provisional democratic self-governing institutions foreseen in UNSCR 1244, and will provide an important opportunity for the people of Kosovo to have a say in how Kosovo is to be run. Extremism and organised crime are significant regional problems, and are the biggest internal threat to stability in Kosovo. We support UNMIK and KFOR in their efforts to combat extremism and to promote law and order throughout the province.

In Macedonia, we strongly support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country and condemn all acts of extremist violence. We welcome the efforts of EU High Representative Solana and NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson to promote inter-ethnic dialogue and an overall political settlement. The British Ambassador in Skopje has played a key role in recent months as Mr. Solana's Special Representative. We welcome the 25 June decision of the EU's General Affairs Council to appoint a senior political figure, Francois Leotard, as Mr. Solana's new full-time resident representative in Skopje. In the light of recent events, we hope he will be able to encourage all the parties to take the political process forward rapidly, to

head off the risk of further violence. We are discussing with Allies a possible NATO role in disarming NLA members in support of any peace agreement.

The key elements of our regional strategy are fostering regional co-operation, inter-ethnic reconciliation and economic reform through the Stability Pact and the EU's Stabilisation and Association Process. As it made clear at the Zagreb summit, the EU has offered the incentives of potential EU membership, generous trade access and technical assistance in return for commitments to democracy, regional co-operation and economic reform. We also continue to take tough measures against extremists and organised crime whose activities continue to undermine the region.

Kashmir

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the position of Her Majesty's Government regarding (a) the recent developments in Kashmir and (b) the scheduled meeting between Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf. [309]

Mr. Bradshaw: We are concerned by the increasing violence in Kashmir. We have therefore welcomed the recent announcement that talks will take place between Prime Minister Vajpayee and President Musharraf in July. I hope that this leads to constructive and meaningful dialogue and progress on all the issues that divide India and Pakistan.

Lord Levy

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the official visits to be made by Lord Levy. [310]

Mr. Bradshaw: Lord Levy will undertake further visits as necessary.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he has met Lord Levy since assuming office; and what plans he has for meetings with Lord Levy. [311]

Mr. Bradshaw: The Secretary of State met Lord Levy on 19 June. He and Lord Levy will meet as necessary.

Overseas Visits

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit (a) the Middle East, (b) the Balkans, (c) Russia and (d) Cyprus. [312]

Mr. Straw: I had planned to visit Macedonia on 26-27 June. However, in the light of developments overnight in Skopje, I decided it would not be right to go ahead now. But I am keen to make an early visit to Skopje and will do so at the earliest opportunity.

I am currently considering proposals for visits to a number of other countries. The House will be informed when decisions have been made.

Stability Pact

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress of the Stability Pact in South Eastern Europe. [313]

Mr. MacShane: The Stability Pact for South-East Europe, in which the EU plays a leading role is aimed at increasing economic confidence in the region, and bringing its states into Euro-Atlantic structures. It is making good progress and has taken an active role in the achievement of two regional agreements. On 27 June, on the eve of the Stability Pact Regional Table meeting in Brussels, Ministers from the region are expected to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on trade liberalisation, while representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia are expected to sign an agreement on refugee returns. While concern remains over political developments, in Macedonia and the UK played a leading role in bringing the trade negotiations to a successful conclusion, supporting the Pact's Macedonian-led trade liberalisation group with expertise and technical assistance.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sudan

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has made to the Government of Sudan over the recent bombings of civilians in the Nuba mountains. [778]

Clare Short: We have regularly expressed concern at the highest levels in Khartoum about incidents of aerial bombing of civilian targets. We do so bilaterally and also with our European partners through the EU/Sudan Political Dialogue. We also issued a statement, with our EU partners, calling for restraint by both sides in the wake of the renewed SPLA offensive in Bahr al Ghazal.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Lottery Funding

Mr. David: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps she will take to direct Lottery funding to where it is most needed. [1272]

Tessa Jowell: I am announcing today a £150 million initiative to target Lottery money at those most deprived local authorities which have received less lottery funding than other parts of the UK. Over three years, £100 million from the Community Fund and £50 million from the New Opportunities Fund will be provided to help some 50 areas. The initiative will be UK-wide and will begin in April 2002.

Radio Licences

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will ensure that United Christian Broadcasting receives a radio broadcasting licence. [15]

Dr. Howells: The Radio Authority is responsible for awarding radio broadcast licences under the terms of the Broadcasting Acts. United Christian Broadcasters already hold two satellite radio licences issued by the Radio Authority.

The Broadcasting Act 1990 disqualifies bodies whose objects are wholly or mainly of a religious nature from holding a terrestrial national analogue radio licence or a digital radio licence issued by the Radio Authority. The White Paper, "A New Future for Communications", announced our intention to lift the ban on religious bodies from holding local digital licences, at the next legislative opportunity. The White Paper also invited comments on relaxing the restrictions regarding the ownership of other licences by such bodies. We are currently considering the responses made. The Government will publish details of their proposals in a draft Bill as announced in the Queen's Speech.

Sponsorship (Tobacco Companies)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment she has made of the financial consequences for sport of the proposed ban on sponsorship by tobacco companies. [143]

Tessa Jowell [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The Government are committed to banning all forms of tobacco advertising and promotion, with certain limited exceptions, and will be introducing legislation in due course concerning tobacco sponsorship of sport. In the Draft Regulatory Impact Assessment to the Draft Tobacco (Prohibition of Advertising and Promotion) Regulations published in 1999, the annual cost of tobacco sponsorship of sport was estimated at £43 million. It is difficult to estimate the extent to which this sponsorship income would be lost as much may well be replaced by other sources.

Wembley National Stadium Ltd.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the £20 million which Wembley National Stadium Ltd. agreed to pay back to Sport England will be returned. [105]

Tessa Jowell [holding answer 25 June 2001]: During discussions held in April, the Football Association reiterated its commitment to repay £20 million of the lottery grant invested in the Wembley Stadium project to Sport England in return for the removal of athletics. The timetable for repayment will depend on the conclusions of the review which Patrick Carter has agreed to undertake.

Rate Relief (Sports Clubs)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions she has had with Brighton and Hove Council regarding the availability of discretionary rate relief for sports clubs. [137]

Tessa Jowell [holding answer 25 June 2001]: I have not had any discussions with Brighton and Hove Council regarding the availability of discretionary rate relief for sports clubs since my appointment. This issue was addressed in the Local Government Finance Green Paper and the Government are currently considering the responses to it. A White Paper will be published later this year.

Cricket

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what representations she has received regarding the need for legislative change to enable action to be taken against individuals who take part in cricket pitch invasions; and if she will make a statement; [110]

(2) what discussions she has had with the England and Wales Cricket Board regarding crowd behaviour at one day international matches. [109]

Tessa Jowell [holding answer 25 June 2001]: I have received no representations on this subject. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Sport discussed the recent incidents at the matches played at Edgbaston and Headingley with the England and Wales Cricket Board prior to, and during, his visit to the one day international at Trent Bridge on 19 October. My right hon. Friend will shortly be arranging a meeting with the Board and the Home Office to discuss a range of issues concerning security at cricket matches.

English Tourism Council

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans she has to restore a marketing function to the English Tourism Council. [103]

Tessa Jowell [holding answer 25 June 2001]: I have no such plans; however, I shall be taking stock of tourism policy, including the work of the English Tourism Council.

The Tote

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans she has to transfer the Tote to the private sector; and if she will make a statement. [96]

Tessa Jowell [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The Government's proposals for the Tote were set out by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary in his statement to the House on 2 March last year. It remains our intention to bring forward legislation to provide for a sale when Parliamentary time allows.

World Athletics Championships 2005

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment she has made of the ability of London to host the 2005 World Athletics Championships. [93]

Tessa Jowell [holding answer 25 June 2001]: A full assessment of London's ability to meet the IAAF requirements for the staging of the World Athletics Championships formed part of the successful bid for the 2005 Championships. The bid was prepared by a steering group which was co-ordinated by UK Sport and UK Athletics.

Concessionary TV Licences

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proposals she has to change the working of the concessionary scheme so that eligibility

for concessionary TV licences is not lost when someone under 60 years moves into the beneficiary's sheltered housing. [926]

Dr. Howells: On 9 April this year, the Government announced their intention to introduce measures to preserve the rights of beneficiaries of the Accommodation for Residential Care concessionary television licence scheme who remain in accommodation provided or managed by a local authority, a housing association or a development corporation, when the social mix or the level of warden cover change. We are consulting with the BBC on the formulation of the necessary amendments to the regulations governing the concessionary scheme.

Professional Sport (Drugs)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action she is taking to tackle the use of drugs by professional sportsmen and women. [780]

Mr. Caborn: This Government are firmly committed to combating doping in sport. We currently spend over £1 million a year on the UK anti-doping programme, which is delivered through UK Sport in conjunction with sports governing bodies. This programme includes both in and out-of competition testing of athletes, the development of a national policy framework, and the provision of education and information services for athletes and governing bodies. We are also working closely with European and International colleagues towards global harmonisation in the fight against doping in sport. In particular we are working to ensure a strong UK input into the work of the recently established World Anti-Doping Agency.

British Board of Film Classification

Mark Tami: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the British Board of Film Classification's Annual Report will be published. [1271]

Tessa Jowell: The British Board of Film Classification's Annual Report is published today and I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

UK Sports Institute

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many athletes have to date received assistance from the UK Sports Institute. [125]

Tessa Jowell [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The number of athletes to date that have received assistance from the UK Sport Institute is 1,416. This is broken down as 855 at UK level, 139 in Wales, 172 in Scotland and 250 in England.

HEALTH

Palliative Care

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what financial support his Department gives services for palliative care; and how such funds are to be distributed. [12]

Yvette Cooper: The National Health Service supports the provision of specialist palliative care services by NHS service providers and voluntary organisations. The NHS Cancer Plan set out our commitment to increase NHS investment in specialist palliative care by £50 million by 2004 to end inequalities in access to care and enable the NHS to make a realistic contribution to the cost that hospices incur in providing agreed levels of service.

Cancer networks are currently developing detailed service delivery plans, which will identify current provision and set out action plans for further development across all services including palliative care. These will be completed by the autumn.

Haemophiliacs

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when recombinant genetically engineered haemophiliac treatment will be available to all patients in England. [306]

Yvette Cooper [holding answer 26 June 2001]: We have already instructed National Health Service trusts to provide recombinant clotting factors to new haemophilia patients and those under 16. Earlier this year we met representatives from the Haemophilia Alliance to discuss the case for extending this provision to all haemophilia patients in England and we are giving this careful consideration. However there is currently a worldwide shortage of recombinant clotting factors and, while this continues, it will not be possible to increase the availability of these products.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Departmental Services

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has for the services and functions carried out by her Department. [1165]

Ms Hewitt: I want to ensure that my Department is fully able to play its part in meeting the Enterprise and Productivity Challenge which the Government set last week for this Parliamentary session. I am therefore announcing today a review of the priorities and structure of my Department. I have asked to receive initial recommendations by mid September.

In addition, on 13 June I announced a major review of my Department's support for business. Some £1 billion a year of support is made available to business and I want to ensure that this funding is properly targeted as part of my drive to help UK businesses get to the future first. The review of business support will focus on two strands: industrial support and manufacturing; and then wider business support. I hope to be able to announce first results by late summer.

Both of these reviews will be undertaken in consultation with business and the Department's other stakeholders.

Power Generation

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what plans the Government have to increase use of gas-fired power; and if she will make a statement; [838]

(2) what plans the Government have to reduce dependence on coal-fired power; and if she will make a statement. [839]

Mr. Wilson: The Government have no plans to do either. Rather, the Government have established a fully competitive market structure for electricity generation in which both coal and gas are competing well.

Yesterday my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that he has asked the Performance and Innovation Unit to undertake a review of the strategic issues surrounding UK energy policy. The aim of the review will be to define objectives within that framework and to develop a strategy consistent with longer-term goals. Competitive markets will continue to be central to energy policy.

Packaging Waste Regulations

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what responsibility her Department has for the packaging waste regulations; and if she will make a statement. [808]

Mr. Wilson: The UK packaging waste regulations implement European Parliament and Council Directive 94/62/EC on Packaging and Packaging Waste. This Directive aims both to reduce the environmental impact of waste packaging and to ensure the functioning of the single market with respect to packaging. The single market provisions of the Directive require member states to ensure that packaging may be placed on the market only if it complies with certain essential requirements and heavy metals limits. These measures are implemented in the UK through the Packaging (Essential Requirements) Regulations SI 1998 No. 1165 and enforcement powers have been given to local Trading Standards Departments. These regulations fall under my area of responsibility.

In addition to my responsibilities for these regulations my department represents the UK at meetings of the technical adaptation committee set up under Article 21 of Directive 94/62/EC.

The other provisions of Directive 94/62/EC are implemented in the UK through the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations SI 1997 No. 648 (as amended in 1999 and 2000) and through similar legislation in the devolved administrations. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has the responsibility for these regulations.

Petrol Prices

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what powers she intends to take to control retail petrol prices in response to a fall in world supply prices. [17]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry does not intend to seek further powers.

The Government believe that free and open competition between fuel suppliers provides consumers with supplies at the best available prices. We are in regular contact with the industry on this and other issues.

Icelandic Fisherman

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many former Icelandic fisherman have been paid compensation for the loss of their jobs, port by port; and what total sums have been paid out in each port. [1045]

Nigel Griffiths: The information requested, broken down by where claimants now live, is in the following table:

Port	Number of payments	Compensation (£)
Hull	842	10,247,847
Grimsby	194	1,492,361
Fleetwood	170	1,792,209
Blackpool	24	205,933
Cleethorpes	46	370,155
Newcastle	151	1,873,305
West Yorkshire	84	958,988
Aberdeen	17	139,187
Others	142	1,324,359

Greenhouse Gases

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what further action she will be taking to encourage businesses to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases. [411]

Mr. Wilson: The UK's Climate Change Programme, published last November, sets out the Government's approach to tackling climate change and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. For business this draws together a range of policies and measures. These include:

Regulation, such as the implementation of the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control Directive through the Pollution Prevention and Control regulations, requiring major industrial plants to take up best available techniques for energy efficiency;

The Climate Change Levy package, which was introduced in April this year, including the associated climate change levy agreements for energy intensive industries and exemption for renewable sources of energy and good quality combined heat and power; and an enhanced capital allowances scheme;

A UK Emissions Trading Scheme, due to start in April 2002, with Government funding of £215 million (net of corporation tax) over a five year period, to encourage companies to participate;

Technology development through the formation of the Carbon Trust to deliver an integrated programme of support to accelerate the take up of low carbon technologies, and help business to prepare for a low carbon future.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Child Support

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many non-resident parents have been affected by the formula for the calculation of child support as outlined in schedules 1 and 2 to the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000. [368]

Malcolm Wicks: The new child support rates set out in schedules 1 and 2 to the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 are intended radically to simplify the calculation of child maintenance due. These new rates will be introduced for new cases by April 2002.

with existing cases transferring once the new system is shown to be working well. No parents have yet been affected by these changes.

Publications

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on what date he expects to publish the next edition of (a) "Households Below Average Income", (b) "Opportunity for All", the Government's annual report on poverty and (c) "Income-related benefits—estimates of take-up". [355]

Malcolm Wicks: "Households Below Average Income 1994–95 to 1999–2000" will be published on 13 July 2001. The next edition of "Opportunity for All" will be published in Autumn 2001. A date for publication of take-up estimates has not yet been determined.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Work Permits

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what basis (a) Mr. Hector Sam and (b) Mr. Carlos Edwards were granted work permits; and what assessment has been made of the extent to which conditions attaching to their work permits have been fulfilled. [1044]

Angela Eagle: The work permit applications for Hector Sam and Carlos Edwards were approved after Wrexham Football Club submitted a sworn affidavit from a Trinidad and Tobago Football Association medical official stating that Carlos Edwards and Hector Sam were injured and unavailable for selection in some of the games used to calculate their playing records in the previous two years.

In line with the policy relating to injuries, set out in the published criteria, those games were excluded from the calculations and the players subsequently met the criterion of playing in at least 75 per cent. of competitive international matches in the previous two years prior to the applications being lodged with the Department.

Work permits are issued to employers to employ an overseas national in a specific post based on the information contained in work permit application form. Where doubt is cast subsequently on that information, the Department investigates this. No concerns have been raised with the Department about Carlos Edwards and Hector Sam.

Travellers

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce legislation to enable police and local authorities to prevent the occupation of parks, sports grounds and public open spaces by travellers and for their immediate eviction; and if he will make a statement. [734]

Mr. Denham: Both the police and local authorities have powers under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to direct travellers or other trespassers to leave land when the appropriate statutory requirements are met. We have no plans to amend this legislation at present although its effectiveness is kept under review.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many items of correspondence from hon. and right hon. Members are currently being processed by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate; what the average length of time is in dealing with such cases; what action he proposes to take to assist IND in dealing with the backlog of cases; and if he will make a statement; [9]

(2) how many items of correspondence from hon. and right hon. Members were dealt with by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in each of the last three years for which figures are available; what the levels of staffing were in each year; and if he will make a statement. [8]

Angela Eagle: Figures on the number of items of correspondence from Members of Parliament dealt with by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) and IND's staffing levels in the last three years are set out in the following table:

	1998	1999	2000
Number of letters from MPs received by IND ¹	8,518	10,092	10,566
Number of staff in IND at end of calendar year	5,229	5,834	8,538

¹ Excludes cases from MPs addressed directly to IND, for which corresponding figures are unavailable

In May 2001, IND dealt with 698 items of such correspondence with an average turnaround time of 38 days. At the end of May 2001 the number of letters from MPs to Ministers awaiting a reply was 1,634, and the number of letters from MPs addressed directly to IND awaiting a reply on 21 June was 2,564. Priority is being given, with the use of overtime, to reducing the backlog of outstanding correspondence. IND also operates a MPs Hotline which provides MPs with a dedicated telephone inquiry point and is intended to reduce the need to correspond on immigration and nationality-related matters. Further significant improvements are being sought to the service, so that the time taken to reply to correspondence continues to be reduced.

European Police Force

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the plans for a European Police Force; and how many officers are to be seconded to it from UK police forces. [149]

Mr. Denham [holding answer 25 June 2001]: There are no plans for a European Police Force. A concrete target for European Union policing capabilities in the context of civilian crisis management was agreed at last year's Feira European Council. In the event of the European Union carrying out a civilian policing operation, the United Kingdom would not be obliged to contribute any police officers, but would decide in the light of circumstances whether it was appropriate for the United Kingdom to contribute to the operation, and, if so, at what level of numbers.

Departmental Transfers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much his Department has spent on administration associated with the transfer of functions to and from other Departments since 8 June. [241]

Mr. Blunkett [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The information requested is not available.

Sex Offences

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library the responses to his Department's consultation on reform of the law on sex offences, "Setting the Boundaries". [192]

Beverley Hughes [holding answer 25 June 2001]: We received over 650 responses to "Setting the Boundaries". We are currently assessing the responses and now considering how best to summarise them.

Police Pensions

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the proportion of expenditure on pensions for each police force in England and Wales for each of the last five years for which figures are available and his estimates for each of the next five years. [157]

Mr. Denham [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The proportion of each police force net expenditure attributable to net pension costs for the last five years is given in the table.

Projections by police authorities of future pension costs were taken fully into account in provisions made in Spending Review 2000.

Police authority net pension costs as a percentage of net expenditure, 1996-97 to 2000-01

Police authority	Proportion of expenditure on pensions				
	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01
Avon and Somerset	14.5	15.6	14.1	14.8	16.2
Bedfordshire	9.6	11.5	12.6	11.9	12.5
Cambridgeshire	11.0	11.9	12.0	12.3	13.0
Cheshire	8.3	11.1	9.9	11.1	11.3
City of London	11.6	12.7	18.1	14.2	15.4
Cleveland	11.9	10.9	13.8	14.5	15.2
Cumbria	12.9	12.8	14.9	14.8	15.4
Derbyshire	12.0	12.8	11.7	11.3	13.4
Devon and Cornwall	12.6	13.5	14.0	14.3	14.0
Dorset	11.2	13.0	13.1	14.5	14.0
Durham	11.8	16.5	11.1	12.6	12.0
Dyfed Powys	12.3	12.0	13.0	12.9	13.2
Essex	9.5	10.6	12.4	12.0	11.3
Gloucestershire	13.7	13.2	13.5	13.4	14.2
Greater Manchester	13.9	16.5	15.6	15.9	15.2
Gwent	9.8	11.6	9.9	11.3	10.8
Hampshire	9.5	9.6	10.1	11.5	10.8
Hertfordshire	8.8	9.5	9.2	11.2	9.8
Humberside	10.9	13.2	12.8	13.3	14.1
Kent	8.9	11.3	11.2	11.3	12.5
Lancashire	13.6	14.2	12.8	12.6	13.5
Leicestershire	11.1	11.9	11.3	11.5	12.1
Lincolnshire	12.5	13.8	14.6	15.3	16.3
Merseyside	15.8	14.9	14.5	15.3	15.7
Metropolitan police	10.1	11.4	12.7	11.7	13.3
Norfolk	12.8	13.2	12.2	11.6	12.6
North Wales	12.7	13.6	14.5	13.7	14.7
Northamptonshire	9.6	12.4	11.0	10.7	11.9
North Yorkshire	14.1	14.5	13.8	16.5	16.3
Northumbria	14.6	15.4	14.9	13.9	14.3
Nottinghamshire	11.1	13.7	13.4	13.8	13.7
South Wales	13.8	17.6	15.2	14.3	15.3
South Yorkshire	8.5	12.1	9.4	10.7	10.6
Staffordshire	14.3	17.3	13.7	15.6	14.8
Suffolk	13.2	13.3	13.0	14.9	13.5
Surrey	9.7	13.7	11.3	10.3	9.3
Sussex	12.8	13.3	14.2	14.8	16.0
Thames Valley	8.5	9.8	9.4	9.2	9.8
Warwickshire	8.9	13.9	13.0	14.5	15.3
West Mercia	10.2	11.0	12.4	12.2	13.3
West Midlands	10.2	12.2	11.5	11.3	11.9
West Yorkshire	11.5	13.0	13.2	14.1	14.2
Wiltshire	13.0	10.4	10.9	11.1	11.1
Total England and Wales	11.3	12.7	12.7	12.7	13.3

Source:

CIPFA Actuals 1996-97 to 1999-2000 and Estimates 2000-01

Private Security Personnel

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department under what special circumstances private security operatives would have the powers of a constable listed in paragraph 3.159 of "Criminal Justice: The Way Ahead" (Cm 5074); and if he will make a statement. [158]

Mr. Denham [*holding answer 25 June 2001*]: Private security personnel, working alongside the police in providing greater public reassurance, will:

"not generally have the power of the constable"

("Criminal Justice: The Way Ahead" (Cm 5074) para. 3.159). Statutory provisions relating to harbours, docks and public parks allow supervisory staff to be sworn as constables, but there are no plans to give private security personnel the powers of constables.

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, indicating the crimes committed and length of sentence received and served, the prisoners released on the home detention curfew scheme before they had served the requisite period; and if he will make a statement. [218]

Beverley Hughes [*holding answer 25 June 2001*]: I refer the hon. Member to the answers given by the former Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdicombe) on 2 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 74W, and to the hon. Member on 8 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 312–13W.

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

Aircraft Noise

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what his timetable is for taking forward policy in the light of the consultation paper "On control of aircraft noise from civil aircraft". [2]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department received some 590 responses to this detailed consultation. We shall announce our conclusions and bring forward legislation in due course.

Homelessness

Mrs Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what action is being taken to reduce the levels of street homelessness in major cities. [341]

Ms Keeble: The Prime Minister set the tough target of reducing the number of people sleeping rough in England to as near to zero as possible and by at least two thirds by 2002.

In 1998, there were approximately 1,850 people rough sleeping in England. In June 2000, published figures indicated that approximately 1,180 people were sleeping rough, (546 in London and 634 outside of London). This

represents a 36 per cent. reduction. The unit will publish updated figures in due course in relation to counts carried out this year.

"Coming in from the Cold", the Government's strategy on tackling rough sleeping, outlined a raft of new policies and services to deliver the target which are now all in place in all major cities.

These include helping people sleeping rough on the streets with drug, alcohol and mental health problems; helping former rough sleepers rebuild their lives through education, training and employment; and preventing a new generation of rough sleepers particularly those leaving care, the armed forces and prison.

Haulage Industry

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on the road haulage industry. [418]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government are committed to working with the road haulage industry to deliver a sustainable distribution system. The 2001 Budget announced a programme of measures, discussed in the Road Haulage Forum and supported by the key partners, to help the industry modernise and improve its environmental performance. We are now working with all parties to implement these. The next meeting of the forum, to be chaired by the Minister for Transport, will take place on 5 July.

Planning Gain

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what proposals he has to improve regulations governing section 106 planning gain. [350]

Ms Keeble: We intend to introduce shortly amendments to the Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995 to require all section 106 agreements related to planning applications to be shown on Part II of the planning register.

We are committed to reviewing the system for agreeing planning obligations and we propose to issue a consultation document later this year.

Climate Change

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans the Government have to alter planning policy guidance to promote renewable energy as part of the UK's climate change strategy. [807]

Ms Keeble: It is already our policy to promote a positive approach to planning for renewable energy as part of the UK's climate change strategy. Last year we initiated the preparation of regional assessments and targets for renewable energy provision to encourage a more strategic approach to planning at regional and local levels.

We intend to review the existing planning policy guidance note on renewable energy (PPG 22) as soon as practicable.

Rural Services

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans the Government have to increase the scope of business rate relief for rural services. [836]

Dr. Whitehead: The Rating (Former Agricultural Premises and Rural Shops) Act 2001 will introduce a new scheme of rate relief for new, small-scale farm diversification enterprises. It will also extend the mandatory element of the village shop rate relief scheme to all food shops with rateable value of no more than £9,000 in a designated rural settlement with population up to 3,000. We intend to commence the provisions of the Act in the near future. At the same time, we will increase the flat rate discount for premises used for the breeding and rearing of horses and ponies to £3,000 rateable value.

Since 5 April 2001, mandatory relief under the village shop rate relief scheme has been available to the sole pub or petrol station with rateable value of no more than £9,000 in a designated rural settlement with population up to 3,000. Earlier this year we consulted on a proposal to extend the agricultural rating exemption to ensure it included share and contract farming and machinery rings. We are currently considering this in the light of responses received. The extension would require primary legislation.

Local Government

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local government and the Regions what progress has been made by the taskforce on local government procurement announced in July 2000. [1457]

Mr. Raynsford: In July last year the Government announced the establishment of a joint DETR/Local Government Association taskforce to review procurement in local government in the light of the requirements of best value. This Government have given a clear commitment to improving public services and procurement lies at the heart of better services for local people.

The taskforce has completed its work and its report, "Delivering Better Services for Citizens", is being published today. Copies of the report have been placed in the House Libraries.

I am grateful for the thorough manner in which Sir Ian Byatt, the chairman, and the members of the taskforce have conducted this review. The report provides a challenging analysis of current procurement practice and makes a number of recommendations for change. It is an important contribution to the debate on the modernisation of local government and the provision of high quality services to local people.

The DTLR and the LGA have agreed to consult jointly on the report. I intend to provide a detailed response to its findings in the autumn, together with an action plan for implementation.

Ordnance Survey Executive Agency

Andrew Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local government and the Regions what agency performance targets have been set for the Ordnance Survey Executive Agency for the financial year 2001-02. [1104]

Ms Keeble: The following performance targets have been set for Ordnance Survey in 2001-02:

1. To achieve a revenue target of £85.6 million (excluding the National Interest Mapping Service Agreement).
2. To achieve an efficiency gain of 6 per cent. over the period April 2000 to March 2004. The target for 2001-02 is 3 per cent. against the baseline of 1999-2000.
3. 93 per cent. of small scale products ordered are despatched with two working days of receipt of order: 98 per cent. are despatched within 10 working days.
4. To increase the number of users of Ordnance Survey websites by 50 per cent.
5. 99.5 per cent. of significant real world features are represented in the database within six months of completion.
6. To reduce the carbon emissions from the Ordnance Survey Headquarters building by at least 1 per cent. year on year.

These targets reflect Ordnance Survey's continuing commitment to customers and to improved value for many of its stakeholders.

TREASURY

VAT (Small Businesses)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to raise the VAT threshold for small businesses to £100,000; and if he will make a statement. [28]

Mr. Boateng: There are no plans to increase the VAT registration threshold to £100,000. As announced in the statement on 18 June by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on enterprise and productivity, Customs are now consulting on a new VAT flat rate scheme. This will make it easier for many smaller businesses with taxable turnover of up to £100,000 to calculate the amount of VAT due and simplify their bookkeeping requirements.

Recreational Clubs

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what increases in rent are being sought by the Crown Estate Commissioners from recreational clubs. [342]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Crown Estate has as its tenants a large variety of recreational clubs across its marine, rural and urban estates, including yacht clubs, golf clubs and athletic clubs.

The rents paid by such clubs, and any increases, are dependent upon the terms of the lease, market conditions and comparable land uses, and are settled on a case-by-case basis.

Child Care

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what tax and benefit measures he plans to introduce to increase the level of support for parents with children of pre-school age who choose to stay at home and look after their children. [934]

Dawn Primarolo: The extra support which the Government have introduced through the Working Families Tax Credit and the Children's Tax Credit has greatly increased the choices available to parents about how to combine work and caring for children. The largest

gains have been for families with younger children. A single-earner family with two children under 11, and with earnings of around £12,500 a year, is now around £3,000 a year better off than in 1997.

From April 2002, the Children's Tax Credit will be increased by a further £10 a week, making it worth up to £1,000 a year for around 500,000 families each year in the year of a child's birth. At the same time the Sure Start Maternity Grant, which is available to families on benefit or on WFTC, will rise to £500.

In 2002 and 2003 increases in statutory maternity pay will guarantee a new minimum income for mothers in the first six months after the birth of a child. A new right to paid paternity leave will help fathers who wish to spend time at home with a new baby.

DEFENCE

Porton Down

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's inquiry into the use of service personnel for research at Porton Down supervised by Professor Ian Kennedy; if individual volunteers who have claimed compensation will be invited to contribute to the inquiry; if the conclusions reached by the Wiltshire police and the information held by the hon. Members who have pursued the matter in the House will be noted by the inquiry; when he expects the inquiry to be complete; and if all the information that is obtained will be published in full. [731]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) on 1 May 2001, *Official Report*, columns 550–51W. The historical survey of the Porton Down volunteer programme will gather information from all source material. This will be largely documentary but will also include information from former Porton Down volunteers.

The historical survey is expected to report in the summer of 2002. The findings of the survey will be published.

Cyprus

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were the findings of the investigation into the death of his Department's civil servant found near Limassol, Cyprus on 17 May; what work he was engaged in at the time; and what conclusions have been reached by the Cyprus police. [729]

Dr. Moonie: The civil servant, Mr. M. Morgan, died within the Western Sovereign Base Area (SBA) and as such fell within the jurisdiction of the SBA police force. It is therefore the SBA police, rather than the Cypriot police, who have carried out the investigation into his death.

This investigation is now complete and the results have been provided to HM Coroner for his consideration at an inquest into Mr. Morgan's death. No date has yet been set for this inquest, pending receipt of a full report from the UK pathologist. As is usual in these circumstances, details of the police investigation will not be made available until after the Coroner's inquest.

Mr. Morgan was the Defence Estates Adviser (Works) in Cyprus providing professional building advice to British Forces Cyprus. This role required Mr. Morgan's close involvement in the transition from contractorised Works Services Management to an in-house arrangement pending the implementation of Prime Contracting in Cyprus.

Aircraft XV208

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if a BAe 146–300 aircraft is (a) owned by and (b) leased to the Meteorological Office to perform research previously done with XV208 Snoopy; what is (i) the lowest operating level and (ii) its highest operating level; and what is the purchase or leasing cost, the cost of on-board equipment and the (A) hourly and (B) annual running cost of the aircraft. [849]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Meteorological Office. I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Ewins to Mr. Robert Key, dated 27 June 2001:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the BAe 146–300 aircraft that will perform research previously done with Hercules XV208, otherwise known as Snoopy. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Met Office.

BAe Systems are currently modifying and fitting out the aircraft to undertake atmospheric research for both the UK University Community and the Met Office. The aircraft is owned by BAE Systems and will be operated under a service provision contract in the first instance with the University of Manchester Institute for Science and Technology (UMIST) and then the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) for a total period of at least 10 years. The Met Office use of the aircraft will be through a partnership agreement with UMIST and NERC.

The BAe 146–300 will be capable of operating at heights of between 100 feet and 35,000 feet above sea level with short periods at 50 feet. The highest operating level, in particular, will allow access to a region of the atmosphere that it is critically important to atmospheric researchers.

Met Office equipment being transferred from Hercules XV208 to BAe 146–300 initially cost in the order of £1.5 million. New and existing on-board instrumentation is also being provided by the University Community.

The leasing, hourly and annual operating costs of the BAe 146–300 are commercial-in-confidence. However, the consequential savings to the Met Office of moving to shared use of the BAe 146–300 will be £8 million over the next 10 years.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the current location is of aircraft XV208; and what is its current role. [847]

Dr. Moonie: Aircraft XV208 is currently based at the Defence Evaluation Research Agency, soon to be QinetiQ, site at Boscombe Down. The aircraft is currently being kept in flying condition while future business for it is explored.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Specialist School Status

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many specialist schools with an arts specialism have so far been designated; and how many she intends to designate by January 2002. [797]

Mr. Timms: Ninety-one arts colleges have so far been designated. We expect the next designations will be made in January 2002, but it is not possible to say how many. Decisions will be taken at the same time as decisions on the designation of language, sports and technology colleges and will depend in part on the relative quality of applications across the categories.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many specialist status comprehensive schools have been designated. [822]

Mr. Timms: Of the 684 designated specialist schools, 616 are comprehensive, 30 are grammar, 29 are secondary modern and nine are special schools.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment her Department has undertaken of the ability of schools to raise £50,000 to support a school's bid for specialist school status. [932]

Mr. Timms: No formal assessment has been undertaken into the ability of schools applying for specialist school status to raise sponsorship. We recognised there were difficulties with the original £100,000 requirement and reduced this to £50,000 in 1999. My Department grant aids the technology colleges and youth sport trusts, which provide advice to schools about raising sponsorship and raise funds themselves to support applicant schools. The network of 684 specialist schools shows that applicant schools across the country, including those from rural and inner city areas, have successfully raised the sponsorship required. We shall keep the sponsorship criteria under review.

Acquired Brain Injury

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what progress has been made on (a) inclusion of information on acquired brain injury in the new guidance on the education of sick children and (b) inclusion of guidance for health professionals on the particular special educational needs of children with acquired brain injury. [783]

Mr. Timms: We will be including information on acquired brain injury in the new guidance on the education of sick children to heighten the awareness of the educational needs of pupils with ABI. The new guidance is currently being drafted and it is expected that it will be issued in September 2001.

The importance of close liaison between education and health services to cover all issues that may effect learning for children and young people with acquired brain injury will be highlighted in guidance on the role of health professionals to be issued in the summer.

Creative Writing

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what steps she is taking to ensure creative writing skills are developed at an early age. [798]

Mr. Timms: We are committed to ensuring that children enjoy writing and develop the skills they need in order to express themselves clearly and creatively. The National Literacy Strategy "Framework for Teaching" ensures that primary school pupils are taught to write independently from an early stage, and that they are given opportunities to undertake a wide range of writing. In May 2001, we published practical guidance for teachers of four to seven-year-olds on "Developing Early Writing", which emphasises the role of imaginative play and talk in improving writing in the first years of school.

Middle Schools

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if she will make a statement on her policy towards middle schools. [800]

Mr. Timms: The Government's view remains that the relative merits of three and two-tier systems of school organisation are a matter for local discussion and determination. Schools should be organised in a way which supports the delivery of the highest possible standards of education and which also reflects parental preference. Local education authorities and school governing bodies, rather than central Government, are best placed to decide on which pattern of provision is most effective for their area.

Teacher Numbers (Yorkshire)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many (a) primary and (b) secondary school teachers were working in (i) North Yorkshire and (ii) City of York local education authorities on 1 May and projected for 1 May 2002. [34]

Mr. Timms: The full-time equivalents of regular teachers (excluding short-term supply) employed in the maintained sector at January each year were as follows:

	2000	2001 ¹
<i>Nursery/primary</i>		
North Yorkshire	2,170	2,230
City of York	650	650
<i>Secondary</i>		
North Yorkshire	2,560	2,590
City of York	640	660
<i>Total</i>		
North Yorkshire	4,730	4,820
City of York	1,290	1,320

¹ Provisional

Note:

Totals may not be the sum of the component parts because of rounding

Regular teacher data are collected in January each year. Figures for May 2001 and projected figures for May 2002 will not be collected or estimated.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Sellafield

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will place in the Library a copy of the report by Arthur D. Little Consultants on the economic case for the Sellafield MOX plant. [955]

Mr. Meacher [holding answer 26 June 2001]: Yes. We intend to publish the report as soon as possible, excluding only that material—such as contract prices—whose publication would cause unreasonable commercial damage to BNFL's commercial operations or to the economic case for the MOX plant itself. We propose to allow people four weeks for comment.

Water Abstraction

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what decisions she has reached about the possible use of economic instruments in relation to water abstraction. [1273]

Mr. Meacher: The Department is publishing tomorrow a paper entitled "Tuning Water Taking". This sets out Government decisions following consultation last year on the use of economic instruments in relation to water abstraction in England and Wales. Copies will be placed in the Library of the House.

The paper confirms that water abstraction charges will remain limited to recovery of the Environment Agency's water resources management costs. The agency is expected to consult by June 2002 on changes to the current charging scheme within this overall cost ceiling. The paper goes on to say that voluntary abstraction licence trading will be made easier by a variety of means, within the Environment Agency's existing powers, while ensuring that trading does not harm the water environment.

WALES

Children's Commissioner

8. Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the work of the Children's Commissioner. [527]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I was delighted that the Children's Commissioner for Wales Bill received Royal Assent on 11 May. The Children's Commissioner for Wales Act 2001 radically widens the Commissioner's role and extends his functions to a far greater range of public bodies, including the Assembly, who provide services or exercise devolved functions.

Peter Clarke took up office on 1 March and his full powers are scheduled to commence this summer, following Assembly Commencement Orders and Regulations. He has been spending the interim months setting up the practical arrangements for his office.

New Deal

9. Dr. Francis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about the extension of the new deal in Wales. [528]

Mr. Tuhig: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly attends meetings with ministerial colleagues, including the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and I am planning a series of introductory meetings with my ministerial colleagues.

The Government's new deal programme has proved a very real success. We are keen to build on this success by extending the new deal 25+ to all over-25s who have been on jobseeker's allowance for at least 18 months; extending new deal for lone parents and extending new deal for disabled people to all those claiming invalidity benefit.

Inward Investment

11. Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of Wales what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry about the factors which attract inward investment to Wales. [530]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular meetings with my ministerial colleagues, including the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. In addition, ministerial colleagues and I gave evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee earlier this year on the role of the UK Government in promoting Wales abroad, including the partnership between the Government, British Trade International and the Welsh Development Agency in attracting inward investment.

Wales has one of the most impressive foreign direct investment track records worldwide, which is a testimony to the high skills levels of the workforce and a range of training programmes, infrastructure, land, property, business services and financial packages. In particular, the securing by the UK Government of Objective 1 status and Tier 1 status under the Assisted Areas map for West Wales and the Valleys allows the Government and the National Assembly to deliver a whole range of financial benefits to companies in that area.

Corus

12. Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has held with the First Secretary in the National Assembly about the development of new employment opportunities in communities affected by the Corus job cuts in Wales. [531]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Government and the National Assembly for Wales responded quickly to the needs of the steel community with measures of help for steelworkers and their communities affected by Corus decisions. Government-funded measures include on-site job shop centres, as well as access to job vacancies and a job transition scheme, providing intensive advice and help with job search as well as early access to training programmes.

Additionally, the National Assembly for Wales announced a £50 million package of regeneration and training from the Welsh block to help create jobs and regenerate the communities affected by Corus decisions and has set up an executive group of the Wales Steel Task

Force to implement schemes. This may also wish to take advantage of the wide-ranging package of measures and operating aids announced in the Budget to encourage enterprise, tax incentives for urban regeneration and more spending on public services.

Tourism

13. Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary about tourism operators in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [532]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with the First Secretary. In light of the current situation with foot and mouth disease, tourism has of course figured more prominently than ever in these discussions.

Additionally, the Under-Secretary of State represents the Wales Office on the Government's Rural Task Force, a body on which the Assembly is also represented. As a result of the work of this task force, several initiatives have been announced to assist tourism and rural industries more generally where they have been affected by foot and mouth disease.

Carers

14. Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will meet the First Secretary to discuss provision for carers in Wales. [533]

Mr. Tuhig: My right hon. Friend and I will continue to have regular meetings with the First Secretary and Cabinet colleagues to discuss a range of issues, including the provision of services in Wales. The Assembly is committed to improving the health and well-being of carers in Wales. On 12 June the Assembly voted to commence the Carers and Disabled Children Act 2000 and approved £3.7 million local authority special grant spending for carers services and breaks. On the same day the Assembly published its first annual report on the Carers' Strategy in Wales Implementation Plan.

Public Services (Funding)

16. Mr. Havard: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the mechanism for calculating the level of Government funding for public services in Wales until 2004. [535]

Mr. Tuhig: My right hon. Friend meets the First Secretary regularly on a range of matters. Last year's Spending Review added some £2 billion to the funding the Assembly will receive by 2003-04 for the delivery of services to Wales.

Business (Promotion)

17. Albert Owen: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he plans to meet the business community in north-west Wales to discuss Government policy on the promotion of business in the area. [536]

Mr. Tuhig: In November last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales met members of the North Wales Economic Forum, which included representatives of business in north Wales.

Both the Secretary of State for Wales and I plan to visit north Wales shortly.

Education

15. Dr. Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the number of staff in his Department with responsibility for education. [534]

Mr. Tuhig: All staff working on policy issues in my Department have responsibility for a number of subject areas. However, within my Social Affairs Policy Branch, I have three members of staff whose remit includes education matters.

18. Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly about the education system in Wales. [537]

Mr. Tuhig: My right hon. Friend regularly meets the First Minister and Cabinet colleagues to discuss a range of issues including the education system in Wales.

I also am looking forward to holding regular meetings with the Assembly Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning to discuss the provision of education in Wales.

My right hon. Friend addressed the National Assembly yesterday on the Queen's speech, which included an education Bill. The provision and improvement of education services in Wales is a priority of this Government.

Employment

19. Kevin Brennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary about employment levels in Wales. [538]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales and discuss a wide range of issues including employment.

The Government's handling of the economy has provided the right conditions for growth and has seen employment in Wales rising by 34,000 since May 1997. Additionally the Government's new deal scheme has proved an enormous success enabling a 65 per cent. fall in the number of 18 to 24-year-olds unemployed and claiming the jobseeker's allowance for six months or more since new deal was launched throughout Wales.

Tuition Fees

20. Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the Rees report on tuition fees and student hardship. [539]

Mr. Tuhig: The report of the Independent Investigation Group on Student Hardship and Funding in Wales was published on 14 June.

I understand that the National Assembly, which commissioned the report, will consider its recommendations very carefully. Any suggestions for changes to the existing system of student hardship and funding will be considered by the UK Government at the appropriate time.

23. Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has held with the Prime Minister on student fees since the publication of the Rees report. [542]

Mr. Tuhig: Neither my right hon. Friend or I have discussed the report of the Independent Investigation Group on Student Hardship and Funding in Wales with the Prime Minister since its recent publication on 14 June.

I understand that the National Assembly, which commissioned the report, will consider its recommendations very carefully. Any suggestions for changes to the existing system of student hardship and funding will be considered by the UK Government at the appropriate time.

Foot and Mouth

21. Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary on the impact of foot and mouth disease on the rural economy in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [540]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I maintain close contact with my right hon. Friend the First Secretary on a variety of issues, including foot and mouth disease.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales is a member of the UK Government Rural Task Force set up to examine the effect of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease across the rural economy as a whole. As a result of the work of the task force, several initiatives have been announced to assist rural industries more generally where they have been affected by the impact of foot and mouth disease.

24. Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the impact of foot and mouth disease on the Welsh agriculture industry. [544]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have weekly meetings with the First Secretary to discuss a wide range of issues, including foot and mouth disease.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales is a member of the UK Government Rural Task Force set up to examine the effect of the rural economy as a whole. As a result of the work of the task force several initiatives have been announced to assist rural industries more generally where they have been affected by the impact of foot and mouth disease.

26. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary on policy initiatives to deal with the impact of foot and mouth disease in Wales. [546]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have had regular discussions with the First Secretary with regard to the policy initiatives to deal with the impact of foot and mouth disease in Wales and have visited affected areas in Wales with the First Secretary.

All efforts are focused on taking action to ensure the disease is contained and eradicated as quickly as possible. The action being taken is severe but the best way to beat the outbreak.

Manufacturing Competitiveness

22. Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had about manufacturing competitiveness in Wales. [541]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Only yesterday I attended the launch of the Transport and General Workers Union policy statement on manufacturing, "Manufacturing Matters", and was able to discuss a range of manufacturing issues with a range of organisations. I also hold regularly discussions with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales and with my ministerial colleagues.

The Government are committed to improving manufacturing competitiveness across the whole of the UK by helping established industries to modernise and compete in new global markets, by encouraging enterprise and by creating a stable macroeconomic climate.

Rural Economy

25. Michael Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he will next meet the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the state of the rural economy in Wales. [545]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have weekly meetings with the First Secretary on a wide range of issues, including the state of the rural economy, particularly in light of the current foot and mouth outbreak in Wales. Foot and mouth has had a devastating effect on an already fragile industry. The Assembly continues to explore initiatives for assisting the rejuvenation of the rural economy in Wales.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales is a member of the UK Government Rural Task Force set up to examine the effect of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease across the rural economy as a whole. As a result of the work of the Task Force many initiatives have been announced to assist a range of rural industries affected by the impact of foot and mouth disease.

Census

27. Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the First Secretary on the census in Wales. [547]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with my Cabinet colleagues and with the First Secretary on a range of issues relevant to Wales.

The National Statistician has confirmed that the National Assembly will be formally consulted about the content of the 2011 census form in Wales.

Police Recruitment

29. Mr. David: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Home Secretary about the recruitment of police officers in Wales. [549]

Mr. Tuhig: My right hon. Friend meets regularly with the Home Secretary to discuss a range of issues including the recruitment of police officers in Wales.

Miners' Compensation

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Minister for Industry and Energy regarding the processing of outstanding claims for miners' compensation in Wales. [548]

Mr. Toubig: I met my hon. Friend the Minister for Industry and Energy to discuss these matters last week. I am sure that we will continue to build on the significant progress made to date.

As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales established the Welsh sub-group of the Coal Health Claims Monitoring Group specifically to address coal health issues in Wales and to report back to the GB-wide group. I am convinced the measures discussed, and the actions so far agreed, will further speed up the processing of coal health claims.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Damages Act

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Lord Chancellor proposes to set a discount rate under the Damages Act 1996; and if he will make a statement. [48]

Mr. Wills: The Lord Chancellor has today laid before Parliament an Order under section 1 of the Damages Act 1996 setting the discount rate at 2.5 per cent. This rate will come into effect on 28 June 2001.

The Lord Chancellor's reasons are set out in the document "Section 1 of the Damages Act 1996: Reasons for Decision", copies of which have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

OFT Report (Legal Profession)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what arrangements the Lord Chancellor is making to consult on the recommendations of the OFT report on the legal profession. [55]

Mr. Wills: The Government have said that they recognise the matters raised by the OFT Report "Competition in Professions" are complex areas and that they will consult on the report, and consider comments on the Director General of Fair Trading's analysis before taking further action. My officials are working closely with their colleagues in the Department of Trade and Industry and other Government Departments to prepare a consultation paper, which we plan to issue in the autumn.

Statutory Legacy

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Lord Chancellor will decide whether the maximum limits for the statutory legacy should be reviewed, so as to reflect changes in house prices and the rate of inflation. [26]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The Lord Chancellor is aware that the levels of statutory legacy in interstate succession have not been reviewed since 1993, and he has asked his officials to carry out a consultation exercise on whether the limits should be raised, and if so, to what level.

Children and Families Service

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment she has made of the launch of the children and families Service. [19]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), a non-departmental public body, is a new dedicated service to safeguard and promote the best interests of children involved in family court proceedings. CAFCASS was only launched on 1 April 2001 and it is still early in the life of the new organisation. The Lord Chancellor is accountable to Parliament for the service's activities and performance and I am taking a close interest in its operation.

Indemnity

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will make a statement on the future of the indemnity principle. [53]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The Government believe the indemnity principle prevents legal representatives from entering into transparent funding arrangements with their clients. The Government's views have been made known to the Civil Procedure Rule Committee and we are working with them to devise ways in which the Government's policy can be brought into effect.

Legal Aid Fees

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what recent assessment she has made of the value for money for fees payable in legal aid cases to (a) junior counsel and (b) QCs; and if she will make a statement. [52]

Ms Rosie Winterton: In determining remuneration the Lord Chancellor is required to consider three statutory factors under section 25(3) of the Access to Justice Act 1999: (a) the need to secure the provision of services of the description to which the order relates by a sufficient number of competent persons and bodies; (b) the cost to public funds; and (c) the need to secure value for money. Recent remuneration measures under that Act have therefore considered value for money.

In publicly funded family work, the Lord Chancellor introduced the Family Graduated Fees Scheme for junior and Queen's Counsel, on 1 May 2001. The scheme provides for set fees, graduated to take account of complexity and specific issues in the case. In criminal cases, regulations introduced in September 2000 have controlled more tightly the circumstances where QCs or more than one advocate might be allowed for the defence in Crown court cases. Individual case contracts have been introduced in high cost cases. These secure the provision of legal services at a fixed price. New regulations, to be introduced in October, will extend the existing 10-day advocates graduated fees scheme for Crown court trials to cases lasting up to 25 days.

Conditional Fee Agreements

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment she has made of the approach adopted by insurers to the recoverability of insurance premiums in CFA-funded cases; and if she will make a statement. [54]

Ms Rosie Winterton: It is open to parties who believe items of cost to be unreasonable to challenge those costs in a court assessment. While it is a matter ultimately for the courts, the Government believe that recoverability includes reasonable premiums reasonably incurred, including premiums on policies taken out before any proceedings start. As long as liability insurers wish to be able to recover their costs in cases that they win, it is not unreasonable for claimants to take out insurance against that risk at the outset and to seek to recover the premium in cases where they are successful.

Jewish Divorces

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans the Lord Chancellor has to deal with the problem of divorce in the Jewish community, when a husband refuses to grant his wife a get. [50]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The Government are sympathetic to the needs of Jewish women who are denied a religious divorce. They have supported two Private Members' Bills on the subject, which unfortunately have not been able to complete their passage through Parliament. Further consideration is being given to the best way forward.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Valerie Davey: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what proposals there are to change the 2001-02 departmental expenditure limit or administration costs limit for the Cabinet Office. [1458]

Mr. Leslie: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates, the Cabinet Office Resource Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2001-02 will be increased by £17,605,000 from £125,417,000 to £143,022,000. The Capital Departmental Expenditure Limit for 2001-02 will be increased by £37,805,000 from £21,980,000 to £59,785,000. The administration costs limit will be increased by £17,605,000 from £124,345,000 to £141,950,000.

This is to take account of the following changes:

- (a) to provide additional administration cost resources of £16,726,000 for increased departmental activity planned from April 2001, by taking up Departmental Unallocated Provision.
- (b) to take up Capital Modernisation Fund money of £24,605,000 awarded for the Corporate IT strategy, UK Online (£15,000,000 from round 3 and £9,605,000 from round 2); and £700,000 for developing a secure Government intranet.
- (c) to take up £12,500,000 for the Cabinet Office new accommodation project from Departmental Unallocated Provision.
- (d) to take up a transfer of £470,000 from the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (formerly the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions) and the Security and Intelligence Agencies, for fast stream recruitment activities.
- (e) to take up £409,000 for the Demonstration Project on Retention and Advancement in Employment from the Employment Opportunities Fund.

The increase will be offset by transfers or charged to the DEL Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 28 June 2001

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Numbers

Jim Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers and civilian staff there are (a) in total and (b) in each police force in England and Wales on the latest date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [1459]

Mr. Blunkett: The tables show, for March 1997, March 2000, September 2000 and March 2001, total numbers of police officers and civilians for each police authority area in England and Wales, together with changes in numbers since March 1997 and March 2000.

On 31 March 2001 total police numbers, including secondments, in England and Wales were 125,519, an increase of 1,349 or 1.1 per cent., compared with the end of March 2000. This is the largest annual increase in police numbers since 1988–89.

Between 31 March 2000 and 31 March 2001 the number of civilian support staff increased by 1,361, or 2.6 per cent., to 54,588.

In total, there were 180,107 police officers and civilian support staff compared with 180,169 in March 1997.

The substantial investment we are putting into the police service is delivering the improvements that we promised. The increase in police numbers since March 2000 is a direct result of the extra funding available to forces via the Crime Fighting Fund since April 2000.

Police strength

GOR/Police force	Strength				Change	
	31 March 1997	31 March 2000	30 September 2000	31 March 2001	March 1997 to March 2001 (Number)	March 2000 to March 2001 (Number)
<i>North East</i>	6,597	6,749	6,820	6,859	262	110
Cleveland	1,459	1,404	1,421	1,407	-52	3
Durham	1,461	1,558	1,581	1,595	135	37
Northumbria	3,677	3,788	3,818	3,857	180	69
<i>North West</i>	17,588	17,153	17,110	17,295	-293	142
Cheshire	2,046	2,011	2,000	2,002	-44	-9
Cumbria	1,144	1,084	1,048	1,048	-96	-36
Greater Manchester	6,922	6,795	6,767	6,909	-13	115
Lancashire	3,247	3,179	3,215	3,255	8	76
Merseyside	4,230	4,085	4,081	4,081	-149	-4
<i>Yorkshire and the Humber</i>	11,750	11,200	11,189	11,234	-516	34
Humberside	2,045	1,932	1,905	1,907	-128	-15
North Yorkshire	1,338	1,283	1,293	1,305	-33	22
South Yorkshire	3,159	3,163	3,184	3,197	38	34
West Yorkshire	5,209	4,822	4,806	4,815	-394	-7
<i>East Midlands</i>	8,436	8,206	8,350	8,427	-9	221
Derbyshire	1,791	1,777	1,780	1,823	32	46
Leicestershire	1,949	1,993	2,010	2,033	84	40
Lincolnshire	1,196	1,115	1,162	1,202	6	87
Northamptonshire	1,177	1,117	1,166	1,157	-20	40
Nottinghamshire	2,323	2,204	2,232	2,212	-111	8
<i>West Midlands</i>	12,290	12,151	12,324	12,429	139	279
Staffordshire	2,211	2,170	2,157	2,129	-82	-41
Warwickshire	926	900	912	926	0	26
West Mercia	2,040	1,887	1,906	1,951	-89	64
West Midlands	7,113	7,194	7,350	7,423	310	229
<i>Eastern</i>	9,727	9,364	9,515	9,694	-33	330
Bedfordshire	1,094	1,028	1,006	1,036	-58	8
Cambridgeshire	1,302	1,237	1,266	1,296	-6	59
Essex	2,961	2,806	2,780	2,887	-74	81
Hertfordshire	1,759	1,767	1,961	1,922	163	155
Norfolk	1,432	1,381	1,387	1,420	-12	39
Suffolk	1,180	1,145	1,115	1,133	-47	-12
<i>London</i>	27,536	26,216	25,415	25,581	1,955	-635
City of London	859	732	720	703	-156	-29
Metropolitan Police	26,677	25,485	24,695	24,878	-1,799	-607

Police strength

Fte

GOR/Police force	Strength				Change	
	31 March 1997	31 March 2000	30 September 2000	31 March 2001	March 1997 to March 2001 (Number)	March 2000 to March 2001 (Number)
<i>South East</i>	15,111	14,971	15,347	15,378	267	407
Hampshire	3,452	3,419	3,435	3,435	-17	16
Kent	3,260	3,204	3,239	3,319	59	115
Surrey ¹	1,620	1,785	2,113	2,066	446	281
Sussex	3,085	2,822	2,812	2,855	-230	33
Thames Valley	3,695	3,740	3,748	3,703	8	-37
<i>South West</i>	9,424	9,313	9,354	9,541	117	228
Avon and Somerset	2,989	2,934	2,941	2,960	-29	26
Devon and Cornwall	2,865	2,841	2,873	2,934	70	93
Dorset	1,284	1,306	1,299	1,354	70	48
Gloucestershire	1,133	1,114	1,142	1,173	40	59
Wiltshire	1,154	1,118	1,099	1,120	-34	2
<i>Wales</i>	6,592	6,632	6,738	6,873	281	241
Dyfed Powys	1,005	1,040	1,045	1,055	51	15
Gwent	1,243	1,264	1,271	1,274	31	10
North Wales	1,369	1,403	1,393	1,444	75	41
South Wales	2,976	2,926	3,029	3,100	124	174
England and Wales ²	125,051	121,956	122,163	123,313	-1,738	1,357
Total secondments	2,107	2,214	2,384	2,206	99	-8
Total ³	127,158	124,170	124,547	125,519	-1,621	1,349

¹ As of April 2000, the Metropolitan police force was reduced in size by a transfer of responsibility for policing some areas to the surrounding forces of Surrey, Hertfordshire and Essex. These changes need to be borne in mind when comparing figures for these forces before and after April 2000.

² Excluding secondments

³ Including secondments

Note:

Because of rounding, constituent parts may not necessarily sum to the totals.

Civilian staff¹

Fte

GOR/Police force	Strength				Change	
	31 March 1997	31 March 2000	30 September 2000	31 March 2001	March 1997 to March 2001 (Number)	March 2000 to March 2001 (Number)
<i>North East</i>	2,557	2,603	2,583	2,568	11	-35
Cleveland	609	595	598	586	-23	-9
Durham	583	590	573	566	-17	-24
Northumbria	1,365	1,417	1,413	1,416	51	-1
<i>North West</i>	6,267	6,994	7,007	7,066	799	72
Cheshire	735	823	870	833	98	10
Cumbria	451	469	505	588	137	119
Greater Manchester	2,612	2,822	2,845	2,858	246	36
Lancashire	1,126	1,422	1,351	1,369	243	-53
Merseyside	1,343	1,458	1,437	1,418	75	-40
<i>Yorkshire and the Humber</i>	4,762	4,922	4,923	4,939	177	17
Humberside	718	840	783	808	90	-32
North Yorkshire	519	492	533	591	72	99
South Yorkshire	1,291	1,391	1,399	1,312	22	-79
West Yorkshire	2,234	2,199	2,208	2,228	-6	29
<i>East Midlands</i>	3,555	3,769	4,039	3,975	420	206
Derbyshire	723	826	865	875	152	49
Leicestershire	755	805	808	806	51	2
Lincolnshire	521	516	554	561	40	45
Northamptonshire	554	599	648	694	141	95
Nottinghamshire	1,003	1,024	987	1,039	36	15

Civilian staff¹

	Strength				Change	
	31 March 1997	31 March 2000	30 September 2000	31 March 2001	March 1997 to March 2001 (Number)	March 2000 to March 2001 (Number)
GOR/Police force						
West Midlands	4,819	4,991	5,132	5,261	442	270
Staffordshire	763	858	897	935	173	77
Warwickshire	376	394	388	412	36	18
West Mercia	942	1,043	1,026	1,095	153	52
West Midlands	2,739	2,695	2,821	2,819	81	124
Eastern	4,234	4,485	4,699	4,802	568	317
Bedfordshire	484	490	488	491	7	1
Cambridgeshire	607	503	543	614	7	111
Essex ²	1,199	1,348	1,472	1,447	248	99
Hertfordshire ²	818	890	948	935	117	45
Norfolk	603	655	651	694	91	39
Suffolk	522	600	592	621	99	21
London	13,840	10,890	10,382	10,273	-3,567	-617
City of London	347	285	235	233	-114	-52
Metropolitan Police ²	13,493	10,605	10,147	10,040	-3,453	-565
South East	6,399	6,966	7,292	7,520	1,121	554
Hampshire	1,316	1,443	1,467	1,482	166	39
Kent	1,384	1,647	1,670	1,796	412	149
Surrey ²	727	762	865	897	170	135
Sussex	1,149	1,328	1,405	1,454	305	127
Thames Valley	1,825	1,786	1,890	1,891	66	105
South West	4,122	4,512	4,581	4,715	593	203
Avon and Somerset	1,438	1,436	1,437	1,452	14	16
Devon and Cornwall	1,159	1,343	1,391	1,453	294	110
Dorset	615	606	681	682	67	-4
Gloucestershire	435	484	498	506	71	22
Wiltshire	475	563	574	622	147	59
Wales	2,455	2,457	2,686	2,706	251	249
Dyfed Powys	322	359	393	401	79	42
Gwent	452	498	490	537	85	39
North Wales	476	519	511	498	23	-21
South Wales	1,206	1,081	1,293	1,270	65	189
England and Wales^{3,4}	53,011	52,588	53,147	53,823	812	1,235
Total secondments	n/a	639	708	765	n/a	126
Total^{4,5}	53,011	53,227	53,856	54,588	1,577	1,361

¹ Excluding traffic wardens

² As of April 2000, the Metropolitan police force was reduced in size by a transfer of responsibility for policing some areas to the surrounding forces of Surrey, Hertfordshire and Essex. These changes need to be borne in mind when comparing figures for these forces before and after April 2000.

³ Excluding secondments.

⁴ In the March 1997 figures, civilian secondments are counted within the figures for the forces from which they were seconded. The increase of 1,577 civilians between March 1997 and March 2001 take account of this.

⁵ Including secondments.

Note:

Because of rounding, constituent parts may not necessarily sum to the totals.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has for changes to the Departmental Expenditure Limit and administration costs limit within his responsibility. [1794]

Mr. Blunkett: Supplementary to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates, the Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL), which covers Request for Resources 1 (Building a safe, just and tolerant society) and Request for Resources 2 (Protecting the

public by holding prisoners in decent conditions and reducing re-offending after release), will be increased by £72,762,000 from £9,714,633,000 to £9,787,395,000. The administration costs limit will be reduced by £1,391,000 from £2,599,850,000 to £2,598,459,000.

The changes are the net effect of the following transfers: £297,000 from the Invest to Save Budget to deliver web orientated modular substance misuse training for communities and professionals; £700,000 from the Capital Modernisation Fund to extend the existing chipping of goods scheme to a further three demonstrator

projects; £8,900,000 from the DEL Reserve to combat organised crime involving trafficking of Class A drugs and people trafficking; £3,600,000 from the Capital Modernisation Fund to purchase scanning equipment for the detection of people seeking to enter the United Kingdom illegally by clandestine means; £3,200,000 from the DEL Reserve to meet the costs of publicity for the 2001 parliamentary election; £5,000,000 to the Department for Education and Skills for the provision of education to young offenders in custody; £1,391,000 to the Department for Education and Skills for the provision of education to young offenders in custody; £1,391,000 to the Department for Education and Skills for the transfer of education services' staff and other changes to the Prisoners Learning and Skills Partnership; the reclassification of £15,656,000 receipts from the Youth Justice Board as Annually Managed Expenditure; and £46,800,000 from the DEL Reserve for non-Voted expenditure on the 2001 parliamentary election.

The reduction of the Department's administration costs limit is the effect of the transfer of £1,391,000 to the Department for Education and Skills for the transfer of education services' staff and other changes to the Prisoners Learning and Skills partnership.

These changes will be offset by transfers or a charge to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Deaths in Custody

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many deaths were recorded (a) in prison, (b) in young offender establishments and (c) in other places of custody in each of the last 10 years; how many in each category were suicides; and how many deaths in custody in each of the last 10 years have resulted in disciplinary proceedings being brought against custodial officers. [1585]

Beverley Hughes: I shall write to my hon. Friend and place a copy of the letter in the Library.

Mr. Satpal Ram

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will grant permission for Mr. Satpal Ram, of HMP Wellingborough, to visit his mother in hospital each day. [1172]

Beverley Hughes: All applications for temporary release or escorted absences for prisoners to visit sick relatives are carefully and sympathetically considered. Mr. Satpal Ram—a life sentence prisoner now at Littlehey prison—has been allowed escorted visits to his mother on a number of occasions. The Governor of Littlehey will keep this under review and allow visits as appropriate.

Asylum Seekers

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the situation of asylum seekers Mr. and Mrs. Eric Moussavou, placed in the Palace Hotel, Southend on 16 May 2000 by the London Borough of Barnet; and for what reason letters from their solicitors, to his Department on 6 February and 23 May have not been replied to. [1095]

Angela Eagle: Mr. Eric Moussavou applied for asylum "in country" in May 2000 and will therefore be supported by his local authority under the Asylum Support (Interim Provisions) Regulations 1999. Local authorities providing support to asylum seekers may choose to disperse the asylum seeker under the voluntary dispersal arrangements which came into effect on 6 December 1999.

The delay in the consideration of Mr. Moussavou's asylum application and in replying to his solicitors' letters of 6 February 2001 and 23 May 2001 are regrettable. Unfortunately, the applicant's papers were incorrectly filed. In view of the consequent delay in processing his asylum claim, arrangements will be made to invite the applicant to attend an interview at the earliest opportunity.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff from each directorate in his Department are to be transferred to other Departments as a result of the transfer of responsibilities to other Departments. [240]

Mr. Blunkett [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The responsibilities and numbers of staff transferred are set out in the table. Some minor adjustments to the staffing numbers may arise as a result of the final arrangements agreed between my Department and the other departments involved.

Responsibility changes	From	To	HQ Directorate	Number	
				In	Out
Work permits	Formerly Department of Education and Employment	Home Office	Immigration and Nationality Directorate	255	0
UK Anti-drugs Co-ordination	Cabinet Office	Home Office	Policing and Crime Reduction Group	30	0
Liquor licensing	Home Office	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate/Legal Adviser's Branch	0	6
Gambling and Horseracing	Home Office	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	9
Planning for the Queen's Golden Jubilee	Home Office	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	10
Functions relating to film and video licensing	Home Office	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Criminal Policy Group	0	0

Responsibility changes	From	To	HQ Directorate	Number	
				In	Out
Fire Services	Home Office	Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions	Fire and Emergency Planning Directorate/Research Development and statistics Directorate Fire Service College, Home Office Agency	0	144
Contingency/Emergency planning (except Chair of Civil Contingency Committee)	Home Office	Unified in Cabinet Office with Home Secretary remaining Chair of the Civil Contingencies Committee	Fire and Emergency Planning Directorate	0	71
Byelaws	Home Office	Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	3
Electoral Law	Home Office	Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	6
Open Government, Freedom of Information, Data protection and Developing policy on National Identity cards	Home Office	Lord Chancellor's Department	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate/Legal Adviser's Branch	0	14
Channel Islands/Isle of Man, Royal and Church matters, Hereditary Peers and Lord Lieutenants	Home Office	Lord Chancellor's Department	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	20
Human Rights	Home Office	Lord Chancellor's Department	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	5
Animal Welfare	Home Office	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	2
Sunday trading, Summer time, Easter	Home Office	Department of Trade and Industry	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	0
Total				285	478

No transfer of staff as there was less than one full-time person working on these functions

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the areas of responsibility that have (a) been transferred from his Department to other Departments and (b) been transferred to his Department from other Departments since 8 June.

[246]

Mr. Blunkett [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The responsibilities and numbers of staff transferred are set out in the table. Some minor adjustments to the staffing numbers may arise as a result of the final arrangements agreed between my Department and the other Departments involved.

Responsibility changes	From	To	HO Directorate	Number	
				In	Out
Work permits	Formerly Department of Education and Employment	Home Office	Immigration and Nationality Directorate	255	0
UK Anti-drugs Co-ordination	Cabinet Office	Home Office	Policing and Crime Reduction Group	30	0
Liquor licensing	Home Office	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate/Legal Adviser's Branch	0	6
Gambling and Horseracing	Home Office	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	9
Planning for the Queen's Golden Jubilee	Home Office	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	10
Functions relating to film and video licensing	Home Office	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Criminal Policy Group	0	0
Fire Services	Home Office	Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions	Fire and Emergency Planning Directorate/Research Development and Statistics Directorate Fire Service College, Home Office Agency	0	144
Contingency/Emergency planning (except Chair of Civil Contingency Committee)	Home Office	Unified in Cabinet Office with Home Secretary remaining Chair of the Civil Contingencies Committee	Fire and Emergency Planning Directorate	0	71

Responsibility changes	From	To	HO Directorate	Number	
				In	Out
Byelaws	Home Office	Department for Transport Local Government and the Regions	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	3
Electoral Law	Home Office	Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	6
Open Government, Freedom of Information, Data protection and Developing policy on National Identity cards	Home Office	Lord Chancellor's Department	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate/Legal Adviser's Branch	0	14
Channel Islands/Isle of Man, Royal and Church matters, Hereditary Peers and Lord Lieutenants	Home Office	Lord Chancellor's Department	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	20
Human Rights	Home Office	Lord Chancellor's Department	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	5
Animal Welfare	Home Office	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	2
Sunday trading, Summer time, Easter ¹	Home Office	Department of Trade and Industry	Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate	0	0
Totals				285	478

¹ No transfer of staff as there was less than one full time person working on these functions.

Dangerous Dogs

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions were brought (a) successfully and (b) unsuccessfully under (i) the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and (ii) the Dogs Act 1871, broken down by police authority, in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [57]

The following table contains the readily available information from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database.

It shows, for 1997, 1998 and 1999, the number of defendants proceeded against and those found guilty of offences under the Dogs Act 1871 and the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 in England and Wales by police force area.

Mr. Morley: I have been asked to reply.

Information for 2000 is not yet available.

Number of defendants prosecuted at magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for offences under the Dogs Act 1871 and Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, by police force area, England and Wales 1997

Police force area	Dogs Act 1871		Dangerous Dogs Act 1991	
	Defendants prosecuted	Defendants convicted	Defendants prosecuted	Defendants convicted
Avon and Somerset	19	1	1	1
Bedfordshire	7	2	2	—
Cambridgeshire	4	—	5	3
Cheshire	9	—	10	6
Cleveland	6	2	9	2
Cumbria	2	—	3	1
Derbyshire	14	4	2	1
Devon and Cornwall	24	2	16	8
Dorset	6	—	11	6
Durham	16	10	6	5
Essex	29	9	22	5
Gloucestershire	15	—	3	2
Greater Manchester	23	6	22	13
Hampshire	14	3	34	20
Hertfordshire	3	—	1	1
Humberside	5	2	2	—
Kent	—	—	1	1
Lancashire	6	—	30	14
Leicestershire	9	—	9	8
Lincolnshire	25	16	2	1
London, City of	—	—	—	—
Merseyside	2	1	12	5
Metropolitan police	24	4	80	42
Norfolk	—	—	3	3
Northamptonshire	2	—	6	1
Northumbria	17	3	35	10
North Yorkshire	13	—	11	4
Nottinghamshire	12	—	6	6
South Yorkshire	2	1	19	8
Staffordshire	4	—	13	6
Suffolk	7	1	5	2
Surrey	2	1	4	3
Sussex	4	2	25	12
Thames Valley	10	1	15	7

Number of defendants prosecuted at magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for offences under the Dogs Act 1871 and Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, by police force area, England and Wales 1997

Police force area	Dogs Act 1871		Dangerous Dogs Act 1991	
	Defendants prosecuted	Defendants convicted	Defendants prosecuted	Defendants convicted
Warwickshire	1	—	3	2
West Mercia	13	4	14	4
West Midlands	7	1	16	10
West Yorkshire	33	2	14	6
Wiltshire	6	5	5	3
Dyfed Powys	7	—	15	5
Gwent	18	8	1	—
North Wales	58	5	1	—
South Wales	14	2	10	4
England and Wales	492	98	504	241

Source:

Crime and Criminal Justice Unit, Home Office

DEFENCE

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Rosemary McKenna: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress of the private-public partnership for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. [1701]

Mr. Hoon: I refer my hon. Friend to the announcement I made in the House on 24 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 778–79, about our decision to implement the Core Competence model for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) public-private partnership. Under Core Competence, around three quarters of the current DERA organisation will be turned into a company with the registered name of QinetiQ plc. For strategic reasons, the remainder, known as the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl), will be retained within the Ministry of Defence to carry out functions that could not appropriately be transferred to the private sector.

Since the announcement in July, work has focused on achieving the legal separation of DERA into the two entities: QinetiQ and Dstl. This work has included the enactment of secondary legislation as outlined in Statutory Instrument 1246/2001 (made on 28 March 2001). This instrument will result in DERA being renamed Dstl and net assets attributable to QinetiQ being removed from the Trading Fund and transferred to the new company.

Subject to final legal drafting and contractual negotiations, I intend to vest QinetiQ plc with its assets and liabilities with effect from 1 July 2001. At that point, QinetiQ will remain a wholly Government-owned plc. Thereafter work will continue on preparation for its eventual sale.

Plastic Baton Rounds

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the change of specification was that led to the decision not to publish the October 1999 report of the Defence Scientific Advisory Council on the injury potential of the L21A1 plastic baton round at the 1-metre minimum range of engagement. [1097]

Mr. Ingram: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by the then Minister of State for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Warley (Mr. Spellar), on

11 May 2001, *Official Report*, column 417W, and to paragraphs 10 and 11 of the statement of Defence Scientific Advisory Council placed in the Library of the House on 2 April 2001.

Pensions (Politically Sensitive Cases)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason war pensions assessors were issued with guidance to discuss cases with political sensitivities with an executive case worker. [364]

Dr. Moonie: War pension is awarded for disablement causally linked to service. The intent of the guidance issued to assessors is to explain that some contended service links are relatively straightforward but that others are more complex, requiring careful consideration and perhaps some discussion with an expert caseworker who is a particularly experienced medical adviser. It is accepted that the wording of this guidance was open to misunderstanding and it has now been amended.

Leslie John Douglas

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the outcome was of the investigation into the shooting of Leslie John Douglas on 13 June 2000; and what actions he has taken subsequently. [1038]

Dr. Moonie: The investigation into the shooting of Leslie John Douglas is not yet complete. The Special Investigations Branch (SIB) of the Royal Military Police are, however, nearing completion of their inquiries although they still have to carry out a number of interviews and produce their final report. It is in everyone's interests that the investigations are completed and that they are thorough. The Ministry of Defence will continue to keep the Douglas family informed of developments.

Porton Down

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of his Department's officials are employed to conduct the comprehensive survey of the service volunteer programme at the chemical defence establishment, Porton Down announced on 1 May; from which branches of his Department these officials are drawn; and what the total budget is for the survey. [990]

Dr. Moonie: The historical survey is currently being undertaken by a Principal (Grade B2) working for the Gulf Veterans Illness Unit. The historical survey is financed through the Gulf Veterans Illnesses Unit and has no fixed budget.

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what aspect of the comprehensive survey of the service volunteer programme at the chemical defence establishment, Porton Down, announced on 1 May will be conducted in public. [1002]

Dr. Moonie: The historical survey of the Porton Down volunteer programme will gather information from available documentary source material and recollections from former volunteers. The survey is expected to report in the summer of 2002 and the findings will be published.

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library copies of the correspondence from the Medical Research Council confirming that the Council is looking at the feasibility of carrying out an independent epidemiological study of Porton Down volunteers. [1988]

Dr. Moonie: The Medical Research Council has agreed that an epidemiological study of Porton Down Veterans is feasible. Confirmation of this can be found in the advertisements placed by the Medical Research Council in the scientific press on 21 and 23 June 2001, inviting expressions of interest from the research community.

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel who took part in experiments at the chemical defence establishment, Porton Down, have been referred to the Medical Assessment Programme since 21 November 2000; and how many of these have been seen by the Medical Assessment Programme. [1999]

Dr. Moonie: During the period 21 November 2000 to 27 June 2001, 78 former Porton Down volunteers have been referred to the Medical Assessment Programme. Of this number, 49 have been seen.

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates officials from his Department and the chemical defence establishment, Porton Down, held meetings with the Medical Research Council since 5 April, regarding its advice on an independent epidemiological study for Porton Down volunteers. [1005]

Dr. Moonie: A working meeting took place on 30 May 2001 between one member of Ministry of Defence staff and one member of the Medical Research Council staff at which practical details relating to an independent epidemiological study of Porton Down Volunteers were discussed.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he hopes to make available the annual report for 2000–01 of the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. [1795]

Dr. John Reid: Copies of the Chief Constable's annual report for 2000–01 will be placed in the Library tomorrow. It is a general report on the carrying out by the RUC of their functions during 2000–01 financial year which is submitted to the Police Authority for Northern Ireland and also to me for laying before Parliament in accordance with sections 48 and 49 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Teachers (Essex)

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many teachers were employed in (a) Essex and (b) the Boroughs of Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea in each year from 1995 to 2000 inclusive. [1071]

Mr. Timms: The full-time equivalents of regular teachers (excluding short-term supply) employed in the maintained schools sector were as follows:

January	Essex	Thurrock	Southend-on-Sea	Total
1995 ¹	n/a	n/a	n/a	11,850
1996 ¹	n/a	n/a	n/a	12,430
1997 ¹	n/a	n/a	n/a	12,580
1998 ¹	n/a	n/a	n/a	12,560
1999	10,580	1,060	1,270	12,910
2000	10,470	1,110	1,380	12,890

¹ Essex local authority was affected by local government re-organisation (LGR) on 1 April 1998, when it became three authorities; Essex, Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea. Figures for 1995 to 1998 are for the Essex local authority prior to LGR.

TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE REGIONS

Finsbury Park Single Regeneration Budget

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what is the total allocation of funds for the Finsbury Park Single Regeneration Budget for its lifetime; and how much has been spent to date. [1047]

Ms Keeble: The Finsbury Park Single Regeneration Budget scheme was approved on 1 December 1999. Total Government expenditure over the seven year life of the scheme is estimated at £25 million. The projected Government expenditure for the financial year 2001–02 is £4,986,000. Government expenditure on this scheme to the end of 2000–01 was £2,846,000.

Social Housing

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what studies his Department is undertaking as to the accountability of registered social landlords; and if he will make a statement. [1080]

Ms Keeble: None. Registered social landlords are regulated by the Housing Corporation, an Executive NDPB of my Department, through published performance standards covering governance, finance, lettings, tenant involvement, development and management. Registered

social landlords are expected to meet these standards. Where they do not, the Housing Corporation has regulatory powers to enforce compliance.

The Housing Corporation is currently implementing a programme of changes to revise its regulatory framework for registered social landlords. Through this programme, the Housing Corporation is reviewing performance standards, encouraging a best value approach by registered social landlords and introducing a new inspection service to examine the services landlords provide. The new framework will be in place by April 2002.

Registered social landlords are also accountable to their governing bodies, whose members act on a voluntary basis and who are drawn from a broad range of backgrounds. For example, the governing bodies of those registered social landlords which are set up as local housing companies (the most popular choice in recent years of registered social landlord for large scale voluntary transfers of properties from local councils)

comprise at least a third of elected tenant representatives, with council nominees and independent members typically each having a third of places also.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what the expenditure from central Government sources was on (a) repairs to council properties and (b) capital improvements to council properties in each of the last five years and for the current year. [1048]

Ms Keeble: Information is not available in the form requested. The table shows actual expenditure, as reported to the Department, by local authorities in England on repairs and capital improvements to their housing stock in each of the last five years. Support for local authority housing from central Government has not generally been earmarked for particular purposes, so it is not possible to show separately the central Government contribution to this expenditure. Spending over this period has been affected by a fall in the number of local authority dwellings so the table also shows spending in per dwelling terms. Expenditure figures for 2001-02 are not available.

Year	Local authority housing revenue account spending on repairs (£ million)	Local authority capital expenditure on council dwellings (£ million)	Repairs expenditure per dwelling (£)	Capital expenditure per dwelling (£)
1996-97	2,262	1,581	657	459
1997-98	2,211	1,502	657	446
1998-99	2,201	1,594	677	490
1999-2000	2,126	1,484	686	479
2000-01 ¹	2,113	1,824	726	627

¹ Provisional

² Based on authorities planned expenditure for 2000-01, submitted to the Department in summer 2000

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local government and the Regions how many (a) dwellings were completed, (b) new council properties there were, (c) new housing association properties there were and (d) new co-operative properties there were in each London borough for each of the last five years. [1050]

Ms Keeble: The available figures are given in the table. The data collected by the Department do not distinguish completions for co-operative properties.

Housebuilding: Permanent dwellings completed by tenure

London borough/ Year	Private enterprise	Registered social landlords	Local authority	All dwellings
Barking and Dagenham				
1996-97	—	—	—	—
1997-98	—	—	—	—
1998-99	—	—	—	—
1999-2000	—	—	—	—
2000-01	—	—	—	—
Barnet				
1996-97	436	79	0	515
1997-98	459	178	0	637
1998-99	629	74	0	703
1999-2000	720	98	0	818
2000-01	488	168	0	656
Bexley				
1996-97	387	63	0	450
1997-98	405	48	0	453
1998-99	189	19	0	208
1999-2000	179	27	0	206
2000-01	384	98	0	482

Housebuilding: Permanent dwellings completed by tenure

London borough/ Year	Private enterprise	Registered social landlords	Local authority	All dwellings
Brent				
1996-97	56	0	0	56
1997-98	29	1	0	30
1998-99	—	—	—	—
1999-2000	—	—	—	—
2000-01	—	—	—	—
Bromley				
1996-97	307	137	0	444
1997-98	—	—	—	—
1998-99	—	—	—	—
1999-2000	—	—	—	—
2000-01	—	—	—	—
Camden				
1996-97	238	279	0	517
1997-98	99	138	0	237
1998-99	366	85	0	451
1999-2000	157	166	0	323
2000-01	149	256	0	405
City of London				
1996-97	0	0	0	0
1997-98	235	0	0	235
1998-99	163	0	0	163
1999-2000	280	21	0	301
2000-01	165	0	0	165
Croydon				
1996-97	256	200	0	456
1997-98	213	362	0	575
1998-99	161	221	0	382
1999-2000	138	194	0	332
2000-01	165	77	0	242

Housebuilding: Permanent dwellings completed by tenure

<i>London borough/ Year</i>	<i>Private enterprise</i>	<i>Registered social landlords</i>	<i>Local authority</i>	<i>All dwellings</i>
<i>Ealing</i>				
1996-97	263	0	0	263
1997-98	761	12	0	773
1998-99	331	125	0	456
1999-2000	148	125	0	273
2000-01	—	—	—	—
<i>Enfield</i>				
1996-97	324	258	0	582
1997-98	549	51	0	600
1998-99	172	139	0	311
1999-2000	105	84	0	189
2000-01	576	344	0	920
<i>Greenwich</i>				
1996-97	156	69	0	225
1997-98	205	226	0	431
1998-99	403	133	0	536
1999-2000	916	64	0	980
2000-01	439	147	0	586
<i>Hackney</i>				
1996-97	64	406	22	492
1997-98	157	517	34	708
1998-99	—	—	—	—
1999-2000	349	91	0	440
2000-01	765	112	0	877
<i>Hammersmith and Fulham</i>				
1996-97	29	14	0	43
1997-98	146	74	0	220
1998-99	122	22	0	144
1999-2000	83	23	0	106
2000-01	75	0	0	75
<i>Haringey</i>				
1996-97	52	199	0	251
1997-98	68	131	0	199
1998-99	25	63	0	88
1999-2000	34	75	0	109
2000-01	126	59	0	185
<i>Harrow</i>				
1996-97	49	83	0	132
1997-98	119	66	0	185
1998-99	146	5	0	151
1999-2000	94	3	0	97
2000-01	110	0	0	110
<i>Havering</i>				
1996-97	234	65	0	299
1997-98	99	39	0	138
1998-99	225	25	0	250
1999-2000	237	47	0	284
2000-01	246	28	0	274
<i>Hillingdon</i>				
1996-97	—	—	—	—
1997-98	97	293	2	392
1998-99	—	—	—	—
1999-2000	322	137	0	459
2000-01	270	286	0	556
<i>Hounslow</i>				
1996-97	598	0	0	598
1997-98	373	38	0	411
1998-99	611	21	0	632
1999-2000	260	0	0	260
2000-01	240	24	0	264
<i>Islington</i>				
1996-97	49	17	0	66
1997-98	151	0	0	151
1998-99	309	65	0	374
1999-2000	424	27	0	451
2000-01	213	44	0	257

Housebuilding: Permanent dwellings completed by tenure

<i>London borough/ Year</i>	<i>Private enterprise</i>	<i>Registered social landlords</i>	<i>Local authority</i>	<i>All dwellings</i>
<i>Kensington and Chelsea</i>				
1996-97	206	255	0	461
1997-98	184	0	0	184
1998-99	155	41	0	196
1999-2000	208	20	0	228
2000-01	101	55	0	156
<i>Kingston upon Thames</i>				
1996-97	169	87	0	256
1997-98	816	22	0	838
1998-99	444	2	0	446
1999-2000	331	45	0	376
2000-01	230	41	0	271
<i>Lambeth</i>				
1996-97	—	—	—	—
1997-98	—	—	—	—
1998-99	—	—	—	—
1999-2000	—	—	—	—
2000-01	—	—	—	—
<i>Lewisham</i>				
1996-97	—	—	—	—
1997-98	108	345	0	453
1998-99	193	167	0	360
1999-2000	156	95	0	251
2000-01	1	150	0	151
<i>Merton</i>				
1996-97	204	133	0	337
1997-98	69	39	0	108
1998-99	108	129	0	237
1999-2000	204	149	0	353
2000-01	120	51	0	171
<i>Newham</i>				
1996-97	105	296	0	401
1997-98	261	103	0	364
1998-99	132	180	0	312
1999-2000	398	120	0	518
2000-01	346	138	0	484
<i>Redbridge</i>				
1996-97	458	50	0	508
1997-98	360	22	0	382
1998-99	95	5	0	100
1999-2000	462	39	0	501
2000-01	120	39	0	159
<i>Richmond upon Thames</i>				
1996-97	48	23	0	71
1997-98	195	6	0	201
1998-99	617	8	0	625
1999-2000	145	30	0	175
2000-01	137	20	0	157
<i>Southwark</i>				
1996-97	—	—	—	—
1997-98	—	—	—	—
1998-99	—	—	—	—
1999-2000	323	13	0	336
2000-01	248	26	0	274
<i>Sutton</i>				
1996-97	479	215	0	694
1997-98	306	32	0	338
1998-99	283	19	0	302
1999-2000	135	122	0	257
2000-01	280	161	0	441
<i>Tower Hamlets</i>				
1996-97	—	—	—	—
1997-98	—	—	—	—
1998-99	—	—	—	—
1999-2000	—	—	—	—
2000-01	—	—	—	—

Housebuilding: Permanent dwellings completed by tenure

London borough/ Year	Private enterprise	Registered social landlords	Local authority	All dwellings
Waltham Forest				
1996-97	370	439	0	809
1997-98	103	743	0	846
1998-99	259	716	0	975
1999-2000	10	186	0	196
2000-01	216	257	260	733
Wandsworth				
1996-97	320	1	0	321
1997-98	231	33	0	264
1998-99	515	36	0	551
1999-2000	541	76	0	617
2000-01	209	3	0	212
Westminster				
1996-97	513	394	0	907
1997-98	560	111	0	671
1998-99	631	113	0	744
1999-2000	600	207	0	807
2000-01 ¹	957	358	0	1,315

¹ Data not available because the local authority has reported for nine months or less in the year

² Local authority has reported for only 10 months in the year

³ Local authority has reported for only 11 months in the year

Planning Controls (Fast-food Restaurants)

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what recent representations he has received on the question of planning controls on the conversion of public houses to fast food restaurants. [597]

Ms Keeble: In the last 12 months, my Department has received centrally three letters from Members of Parliament and eight letters from members of the public about planning controls on the conversion of public houses to fast food restaurants and takeaways.

Nutts Farm Caravan Site

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will conduct an inquiry into the sale of Nutts Farm caravan site by Swale borough council; and if he will make a statement. [1147]

Ms Keeble: It is for the local authority to decide whether and to whom to dispose of their land. Authorities should normally dispose of property for the best obtainable consideration, which is normally its market value. If a local authority wishes to accept a bid for less than the best consideration, they must obtain the consent of the Secretary of State either through a general consent or a specific consent.

I understand that Swale borough council took the decision to sell the caravan site as the result of a best value review. Under best value the authority is required to consult local people, businesses and voluntary organisations. It is, however, for the local authority to decide exactly whom to consult and how to carry out such consultations. Moreover, it will be the responsibility of elected members to weigh the different points of view revealed by consultation exercises.

If local people believe that consultations were not carried out properly, they can make representations to the auditor, who audits the best value performance plan, or the Best Value Inspection Service, which carries out inspections of the services provided by the authority.

Community Transport Schemes

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what financial support his Department has given in the current financial year to community transport schemes. [11]

Ms Keeble: My Department supports the community transport sector through funding the Community Transport Association's Information and Advice Service. That Service, which will receive £100,000 in funding this financial year, provides support and advice to community transport schemes and local authorities across the country.

In direct support for community transport schemes, the local transport capital settlement for 2001-02 provided £559 million (including reserves) of capital funding for local authorities in England, outside London, for use on small scale integrated transport measures. Authorities have discretion in the expenditure of such resources that may be used as capital support for community transport schemes in line with the priorities established within their local transport plans.

We have also made available £10 million in the current financial year for those and other transport projects in rural areas through the Rural Transport Partnership and the Parish Transport Grant schemes administered by the Countryside Agency.

Awards to be made later this year to bids successful in this year's Rural and Urban Bus Challenge schemes will also include significant new financial support for community transport services. This will be in addition to support already being given as a result of earlier rounds of the Rural Bus Challenge. Many of the existing 150 challenge awards involve community transport provision.

My Department has already consulted relevant organisations on plans to extend eligibility for fuel duty rebate to a wider range of community transport services, which will be implemented in this financial year.

Rural Housing

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what recent initiatives have been taken in order to provide affordable housing in rural areas; and if he will make a statement. [27]

Ms Keeble: Our proposals for increasing the supply of affordable housing in rural areas are set out in Chapter 5 of "Our countryside: the future—A fair deal for rural England", a White Paper (Cm 4909) published in November 2000. In summary, they are: doubling funding for the Housing Corporation between 2000 and 2003 to benefit both rural and urban areas; doubling the size of the Housing Corporation's programme in small rural settlements from 800 to 1,600 homes per year; local authorities to be able to charge the full rate of council tax on second homes and retain the extra revenue (subject to consultation); and a package of VAT reforms to encourage additional conversions of properties for residential use.

We have also reminded local authorities of existing powers to limit the resale of council homes, bought under the Right to Buy scheme, to local people. This can be done in rural areas that meet certain criteria.

Details of all these measures are set out more fully in the Rural White Paper.

Aviation Policy

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions when he expects to publish the results of his consultation on aviation policy. [1030]

Mr. Spellar: We plan to publish a summary of the responses to the consultation document, "The Future of Aviation", later this summer. We will give careful consideration to the responses and take them into account in deciding policies for the new air transport White Paper, which we hope to publish next year. All responses (except those from respondents who requested confidentiality) can be viewed by the public, in the Department's Library.

Speed Limits

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what plans the Government have to introduce a mandatory 20 mph zone in areas close to schools. [1069]

Ms Keeble: The Government have given local authorities the power to introduce 20 mph zones. Our Road Safety Strategy encourages their use in the areas where the most vulnerable are present, like the areas around schools.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans she has to review the process of awarding the contract to operate the National Lottery. [89]

Tessa Jowell [holding answer 25 June 2001]: I remain committed to reviewing the process by which the National Lottery operating licence is awarded to see if there is scope for improving the present system. I will be making a further announcement about the review in due course.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps she will take in the event of the redevelopment of Wembley Stadium not proceeding to recover public funds invested in the project. [106]

Tessa Jowell [holding answer 25 June 2001]: Under the terms of the lottery funding agreement, Sport England are able to initiate action to recover the lottery grant

Housing

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions what percentage of council housing stock in Stockton, South has been sold since 1979. [1093]

Ms Keeble: In the period 1 April 1979 to 31 December 2000, Stockton-on-Tees unitary authority (and the predecessor borough council) reported 6,875 sales of council housing stock. This represents some 32 per cent. of the council's reported stock in April 1979.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will list the amount of National Lottery money (a) raised for good causes, (b) allocated to good causes and (c) received by good causes in each of the last four years. [70]

Tessa Jowell [holding answer 25 June 2001]: The net proceeds of the National Lottery are paid into the National Lottery Distribution Fund (NLDF). After meeting the costs of the National Lottery Commission (the Lottery regulator), the costs incurred in exercising my duties under the National Lottery etc. Act 1993 (as amended), and the costs incurred by the National Debt Commissioners in investing the balance of the NLDF, all of the money in the NLDF is immediately allocated to good causes. The amount raised for good causes is therefore equal to the amount allocated to good causes. These figures are shown in rows (a) and (b) of the table. The money raised for good causes is distributed by the 15 bodies listed in section 23 of the Act. These bodies draw down money as needed and the amounts drawn down are shown in row (c).

£ million

	2000-01	1999-2000	1998-99	1997-98
(a) Amount raised for good causes	1,789	1,752	1,939	1,974
(b) Amount allocated to good causes	1,789	1,752	1,939	1,974
(c) Amount received by good causes	1,855	1,908	1,831	1,087

committed to the Wembley project, should Wembley National Stadium Ltd. be unable to develop a new stadium at Wembley.

Religious Broadcasting

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will ensure that religious organisations are given the opportunity to obtain local digital radio broadcasting licences. [983]

Dr. Howells: The White Paper "A New Future for Communications" announced that the Government will bring forward legislation to allow religious bodies to hold a local terrestrial digital licence.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment she has made of the compatibility of the Broadcasting Act 1996 with the freedom of expression provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights. [985]

Dr. Howells: The courts decide whether legislative provisions are compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. No declaration of incompatibility has been made in the domestic courts under the Human Rights Act 1998 as regards any provision of the Broadcasting Act 1996; nor has there been any finding of incompatibility in respect of that legislation by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if non-religious radio stations can automatically renew analogue licences by applying for digital licences. [1984]

Dr. Howells: An application is not sufficient. There is provision for automatic renewal of analogue radio licences only if the licence holder is providing (or is committed to provide) a programme service on a relevant digital multiplex. Religious organisations are disqualified from holding digital radio licences and so cannot take advantage of these provisions.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when applications for the last digital radio licence in London will be determined. [1982]

Dr. Howells: The award of the third and final digital multiplex licence for Greater London was made by the Radio Authority on 6 June.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

Public Accounts Commission

Mr. Love: To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission who will be answering questions on behalf of the Public Accounts Commission. [1709]

Mr. Alan Williams: I was elected Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission at its meeting on 26 June and will normally expect to answer questions on behalf of the Commission. In the event of my unavoidable absence, questions will be answered by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell).

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Departmental Seconded

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the name, company, grade, directorate, start and end dates and brief description of responsibilities for each person presently seconded into her Department from the private sector. [1706]

Ms Hewitt: There are 104 individuals currently on secondment to the Department. The details requested are given in the table, which has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Antarctica

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her Department's expenditure was on Antarctica in each of the past five years. [1054]

Mr. Wilson: The expenditure by the Department of Trade and Industry through the Science Budget on the British Antarctic Survey is given in the table.

£000

Science budget expenditure

1996-97	26,823
1997-98	26,550
1998-99	26,523
1999-2000	29,892
2000-01	39,556

Deregulation

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which Minister within her Department has responsibility for deregulation; and if she will list deregulation measures enacted since May 1997. [745]

Ms Hewitt [holding answer 25 June 2001]: Ensuring that regulation is effective and not burdensome is a key issue for business, and therefore for my Department. We will be working closely with the Cabinet Office and the Better Regulation Task Force to ensure that business concerns are understood and that my Department regulates only where necessary and with a light touch. The Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths), will have specific responsibility for regulatory reform within my Department.

Key measures enacted since May 1997 for which this Department is responsible which have resulted in cost savings for business are as follows:

The Companies Act 1985 (Audit Exemption) (Amendment) Regulations 2000 raised to £1 million the turnover threshold before companies are subject to an annual external statutory audit of their accounts.

The Companies Act 1985 (Electronic Communications) Order 2000 removed restrictions on companies' use of electronic media when communicating with their members and with Companies House.

The Wireless Telegraphy (Short Range Devices) (Exemption) (Amendment) Regulations 1997 removed certain radio equipment from licensing requirements.

The Hallmarking (Hallmarking Act Amendment) Order 1998 extended the category of articles exempted from hallmarking requirements to articles produced before 1920, rather than 1900.

The Wireless Telegraphy (Exemption) Regulations 1999 exempted certain radio equipment from licensing requirements.

The Consumer Credit (Exempt Agreements) (Amendment) Order 1999 exempted credit unions and other non-commercial fixed-rate low-cost loan providers from regulation.

The Companies (Forms) (Amendment) Regulations 1999 removed the requirement to include certain information in companies' returns to Companies House, including former names and directors' other directorships.

The Gas Act 1986 (Gas Storage) (Exemptions) Order 1999 and two subsidiary Orders exempted persons operating certain types of gas storage facility from the need to have a Public Gas Transporter licence.

The Companies (Investment Companies) (Distribution of Profits) Regulations 1999 removed restrictions on companies which prevented them from using capital profits to repurchase their own shares.

The Consumer Credit (Content of Quotations) and Consumer Credit (Advertisements) (Amendments) Regulations 1999 removed the requirement for warning statements to be included in TV, cinema, and radio advertisements for credit involving taking on a mortgage.

The Partnerships (Unrestricted Size) No. 14 Regulations exempted Chartered Surveyors from the law restricting the number of partners in a given firm to 20.

The Insolvency (Amendment) Regulations 2000 enabled members of the Insolvency Services Account to pay and receive moneys by electronic transfer.

The Wireless Telegraphy (Citizens Band Amateur Apparatus) (Various Provisions) (Amendment) Order 2000 removed all restrictions on the import and manufacture of citizens' band radio equipment.

The Electricity (Class Exemptions from the Requirement for a License) (Amendment) (England and Wales) Order 2000 allowed more owners of small power stations to generate electricity without needing a licence.

The Merger (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 2001 exempt small and medium-sized firms engaged in merger activity from the requirement to pay a fee where the merger falls to be scrutinised by the Office of Fair Trading.

Competition Law

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the cost of the review of UK competition policy conducted by PriceWaterhouseCoopers was; and what her Department's response is to the policy recommendations made. [751]

Miss Melanie Johnson [holding answer 25 June 2001]: PriceWaterhouseCoopers were selected to undertake the Peer Review of the UK Competition Policy Regime after a competitive tender was held in accordance with the DTI's procurement rules. The cost of the contract was £70,000 (excl. VAT).

The Peer Review Report is published on the DTI website and will inform decisions made in the context of the Enterprise Bill. I have placed a copy in the Library of the House.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the cases since May 1997 (a) where her predecessors referred mergers to the Competition Commission (i) on the advice of and (ii) against the advice of the Director General of the Office of Fair Trading and (b) where Ministers have not followed merger recommendations by the Competition Commission. [750]

Miss Melanie Johnson [holding answer 25 June 2001]: Table 1 lists all the merger cases which have been referred to the Competition Commission (previously known as the Monopolies and Mergers Commission) since May 1997. The Director General of Fair Trading (DGFT) does not advise on newspaper mergers. With the exception of NEG/ScotRail, NEG/Central Trains, Pacificorp/Energy Group, and NTL/CWC, all other references were made in accordance with the advice of the DGFT.

Table 2 lists the cases since May 1997 where Ministers have not followed merger recommendations by the Competition Commission/Monopolies and Mergers Commission.

Table 1

Merger referred	Date referred
National Express Group/Central Trains	May 1997
National Express Group/ScotRail	May 1997
Priory Hospitals/Charter	June 1997
Capital Radio/Virgin Radio	July 1997
Mirror Group/Midland Independent Newspapers	July 1997
Pacificorp/Energy Group	August 1997
Fresenius/Caremark	December 1997
Johnston Press/Home Counties Newspapers Holdings	February 1998
Ladbroke/Corals	March 1998
Tomkins/Kerry Group	April 1998
New Decaux/More Group	May 1998
Arriva/Lutonian Buses	July 1998
Cendant/RAC Motoring Services	September 1998
IMS Health/PMSI	October 1998
BSkyB/Manchester United	October 1998
Rockwool/Owens Corning	December 1998
British Airways/CityFlyer Express	January 1999
Johnston Press/Portsmouth and Sunderland Newspapers	February 1999
News Communications and Media/Portsmouth and Sunderland Newspapers	February 1999
Newsquest/Portsmouth and Sunderland Newspapers	February 1999
Air Products/DeVilbiss Medequip	February 1999
Hepworth/Naylor Industries	March 1999
Trinity/Mirror Group	March 1999
Regional Independent Media Holdings/Mirror Group	March 1999
NTL/Newcastle United	April 1999
Whitbread/Allied Domecq	July 1999
Alanod Aluminium/Metalloxyd	July 1999
Universal Foods/Poynning Holdings	August 1999
CHC Helicopter Corporation/Helicopter Services Group	September 1999
NTL/CWC	November 1999
Vivendi/BSkyB	November 1999
Newsquest/News Communications and Media	December 1999
Johnston Press/News Communications and Media	December 1999
Trinity Mirror/News Communications and Media	December 1999
Carlton/United News and Media	February 2000
Granada/Carlton Communications	February 2000
Granada/United News and Media	February 2000
Independent News and Media/Belfast Telegraph	March 2000
Air Canada/Canadian Airlines	May 2000
Sylvan International/Locker Group	June 2000

Table 1

<i>Merger referred</i>	<i>Date referred</i>
BUPA/Community Hospitals Group	June 2000
Nutreco/Hydro Seafood	July 2000
Gannett UK/Regional Independent Media Holdings	July 2000
Johnston Press/Regional Independent Media Holdings	July 2000
Guardian Media Group/Regional Independent Media Holdings	July 2000
Interbrew/Bass	September 2000
Grundfos Holdings/Myson Pumps	October 2000
CAIK Holding/Icopal AS	November 2000
Adtranz/Railcare	November 2000
City Technology/Marconi Applied Technologies	December 2000
BASF/Takeda Chemicals	December 2000
SCR Sibelco/assets of Anglo Pacific	January 2001
Lloyds TSB/Abbey National	February 2001
Reed Elsevier/Harcourt	February 2001
General Healthcare Group/Community Hospitals Group	March 2001
Octagon Motorsports/assets of British Racing Drivers Club	April 2001
Blockbuster/Apollo Video	May 2001

Table 2

<i>Merger report</i>	<i>Date report published</i>
Bass/Carlsberg Tetley	June 1997
British Airways/CityFlyer Express	July 1999
Trinity/Mirror Group	July 1999
Sylvan International/Locker Group	November 2000

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to introduce criminal sanctions for breaches of competition law. [749]

Miss Melanie Johnson [holding answer 25 June 2001]: We have announced our intention to consult on proposals that there should be a new criminal offence for individuals who engage in cartels. These proposals will be published in July.

Internal Market, Consumers and Tourism Council

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the outcome of the Internal Market, Consumers and Tourism Council on 30 and 31 May. [1705]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Deputy Permanent Representative Bill Stow represented the UK at the Internal Market, Consumers and Tourism Council ("IMCT") in Brussels on 30 and 31 May.

The Council reached agreement on Directives on Fair Value Accounting, Life Assurance and Short-Chain Chlorinated Paraffins.

The proposed amendment to the Cosmetics Directive was referred back for further negotiation in the light of numerous remaining reserves. On the Distance Marketing of Financial Services Directive, which sets out minimum standards for information to be provided by financial services providers, it was not possible to reach a qualified majority. On the proposed Directive on Food Supplements (vitamins and minerals) which aims to harmonise rules on their authorisation, marketing and labelling, there was also no agreement as there was no qualified majority.

Agreement was reached on a Common Approach to the key issues on the Community Patent. This defines the principles under which work can be taken forward. The

Presidency is now able to ask the European Patent Organisation to prepare for a diplomatic conference to revise the European Patent Convention.

There was general support for a common approach on Food Law and the establishment of the European Food Authority, which would guide future work with a view to possible political agreement in June.

The Commission gave an update on its plans to review the Consumer Credit Directive and agreement was reached on a progress report on two draft Directives covering solvency margins for life assurance and non-life assurance undertakings. These aim to enhance the protection of policyholders by strengthening solvency margin requirements. The Council took note of a progress report on negotiation of the draft public procurement directives. The Presidency concluded that the Council remained committed to reaching agreement by the end of the year.

The draft report on the Integration of Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development into Internal Market Policy for the European Council was adopted without discussion and the Draft Council Conclusions on the Commission's 2001 review of the Internal Market Strategy were approved. The draft Council Resolution on a strategy for the Customs Union, which is intended to improve standards of customs services throughout the EU, taking account of changes such as enlargement, e-commerce and customs related fraud, was adopted without discussion. The draft Council Resolution on eEurope: Information and Network Security was agreed with minimal discussion.

There was a Presidency report of the discussions held at the informal Ministerial in Lund which dealt with key items of consumer interest in the Internal Market and the Commission commented on the debate on the General Regulatory Framework on Good Market Behaviour or "Duty to Trade Fairly".

There was an exchange of information on the state of play of preparations for preparing consumers for the introduction of euro notes and coins. Belgium and Spain outlined priorities for their Presidencies (the Joint Work Programme) and the Commission presented its latest

version of the Single Market Scoreboard, which records member states' performance in transposing Single Market Directives.

Over lunch on 31 May, the Council discussed joint action on the single market between EU and Russia, the Community Design Regulation and International Exhaustion of Trademarks (Parallel Trade).

Flexible Working Hours

Mr. Hendrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the terms of reference are for the taskforce that is to consider how to give parents of young children a right to make a request to work flexible hours. [1707]

Ms Hewitt: The Work and Parents Taskforce will look at how to meet parents' desire for more flexible work patterns in a way which is compatible with business efficiency. It will look at how best to encourage and enable employers to create additional opportunities for parents of young children to work flexibly, for the benefit of employers, employees and their children.

The Taskforce will:

building on best practice, design a light-touch legislative approach to giving parents of young children a right to make a request to work flexible hours and to have this request considered seriously by the employer;

take fully into account the particular needs of small employers in designing such a solution, including whether they should be subject to special conditions;

integrate existing best practice and the reasonable operational needs of business;

put the emphasis on resolving requests within the business rather than through applications to employment tribunals;

consider whether other changes to the law are needed to remove any legal or institutional impediments to flexible working;

consider what further support would help employers and employees to make and consider cases for flexible working; and

consider whether extra help with the training and development of people working flexibly is needed.

The Taskforce will report in November 2001. It will be chaired by Professor Sir George Bain. Other members of the Work and Parents Taskforce will be:

Members

Fiona Cannon	Equal Opportunities Commission
Kay Carberry	Trades Union Congress
John Cridland	Confederation of British Industry
Martin Gayle	Martin Gayle at Aveda
Mike Griffin	King's College Hospital Trust
Anne Minto OBE	Smiths Industries
Sue Monk	Parents at Work, Chief Executive
Maureen Rooney	Trades Union Congress
Simon Topman	J. E. Hudson & Co. (ACME Whistles)

British Trade International

Mr. Hendrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what changes will be made to the resource departmental expenditure limit of British Trade International. [1704]

Ms Hewitt: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the voted element of the Resource Departmental Expenditure Limit for British Trade International will be increased by £2,000,000, from £84,634,000 to £86,634,000.

This increase, which will be made to the net provision of British Trade International, will be offset by a transfer of £2,000,000 in resources from the Department of Trade and Industry to fund the Enterprise Scholarships and Entrepreneurs Pilot programmes.

Gas Processing Industry

Mr. Hendrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to provide advice to owners of onshore gas processing infrastructure in relation to their statutory obligations to publish their main commercial conditions for access to infrastructure. [1708]

Mr. Wilson: The Department has today issued guidance to owners of onshore gas processing facilities and relevant pipelines to assist them in meeting their obligations under the Gas Act 1995 and the Pipelines Act 1962 to publish their main commercial conditions for access.

We have also published today the first element of the departmental response to its consultation on "Oil and Gas Infrastructure: Access Provisions and Voluntary Arrangements"; this response relates to the content of the guidance on main commercial conditions.

Copies of both documents have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Dr. Stoute: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what changes will be made to the departmental expenditure limit and administration costs limit for her Department. [1703]

Ms Hewitt: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimates, the Departmental Expenditure Limit for the Department of Trade and Industry will be increased by £62,805,000, to £4,549,049,000 from £4,486,244,000. In addition the gross running costs limit will be reduced by £69,000, from £412,007,000 to £411,938,000.

These changes result from:

- (i) the take up of £1,700,000 from the Capital Modernisation Fund for projects to develop Novel Recycling Techniques and to establish a UK Oil Portal;
- (ii) the transfer of £2,000,000 in resources to British Trade International for the administration of enterprise scholarships and pilot programmes for entrepreneurs;
- (iii) the transfer of £105,000 in administration costs from the Department for the Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs to the Small Business Service for the administration of the Farm Business Advice Service;
- (iv) a receipt from the Department for the Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs of £14,150,000 in programme expenditure for the delivery by the Small Business Service (SBS) of the Farm Business Advice Service, which will offset an equivalent increase in the gross expenditure provision;
- (v) the transfer of £350,000 from programme to administration costs in respect of implementation of the Postal Services Act 2000;

- (vi) the reclassification from administration costs to programme of the provision of £524,000 from the Invest to Save budget for the development of a video link between a Court and an Official Receiver's Office, and of debt advice pilots;
- (vii) the take up of £31,500,000 from the unused balance of the Department's end-year flexibility entitlement from 1999–2000, as set out in the Public Expenditure Outturn White Paper (Cm 4812) for the Rolls Royce Trent 600 and 900 projects;
- (viii) the provision of £31,500,000 from the Reserve for the Rolls Royce Trent 600 and 900 projects.

All of the above increases will either be offset by transfers or charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Energy and Industry Council

Dr. Stoute: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the outcome of the Energy and Industry Council on 14 and 15 May. [1702]

Mr. Wilson: The council considered several matters of interest to the United Kingdom.

An exchange of views and adoption of Council conclusions on the Green Paper: Towards a European Strategy for the Security of Energy Supply, and a policy debate on the internal market in electricity and gas formed the centre-piece of this energy council.

On security of supply, the discussion was structured around a series of questions set by the Presidency: the need for a more co-ordinated approach; Community level measures that could be envisaged; the contribution of demand side measures and the development of new technologies; and the need to reinforce the dialogue with supplier countries. The UK welcomed the Green Paper as a good basis for debate, and said that market liberalisation was essential to the improvement of security of supply within the European Union and that a single market would provide the necessary investment signals. As far as indigenous resources were concerned the UK said it would continue to ensure that the North Sea was fully exploited. The UK supported measures to provide more effective control of demand, particularly in the areas of energy efficiency and fuel efficiency and in this respect we welcomed the proposed directive on energy performance in buildings. In response to the discussion on use of fiscal measures, the UK recalled that the reference to fiscal instruments in the Green Paper did not alter the requirement for unanimity in fiscal matters. Furthermore, the UK did not see any need for tax harmonisation measures in this area. Dialogue with supplier countries was important but the focus should not be exclusively on Russia. The aim should be to encourage a sound investment climate in supplier countries and avoid creating the impression that the EU was in a weak position by implying that we were desperate for fuel supplies. The conclusions were adopted.

On the discussion on the internal market, the UK welcomed both the draft Directive to accelerate the completion of the internal market in electricity and gas, and the draft Regulation on cross-border electricity trading, which should be treated as a single package. On the draft directive the UK stressed the need for legal separation of transmission and distribution operations, regulated third party access, independent regulation and 100 per cent. market opening as soon as possible. We supported the Netherlands' idea of a workshop to move

council discussion forward quickly. We also urged the Commission to continue its work on cross-border tariffication and congestion management but at the same time indicated the need to consider carefully the scope of the proposed Regulation. We said that public service obligations were best met within an efficiently functioning competitive market, as the final version of the DTI study of the UK's experience (copies of which were distributed) demonstrates. We supported the general agreement that the Florence and Madrid processes were useful and that they should continue but within a more formal legal structure. The UK also supported the widespread agreement that Trans-European Energy Networks (TENS) should be exploited further to help solve potential network problems.

In addition, the council resolution on a strategy for integrating environmental aspects and sustainable development into energy policy was adopted without discussion. The council also noted Commission presentations on a new proposal for a Directive on energy performance of buildings, enhancing Euro-Mediterranean Co-operation, the Northern Dimension: Energy Sector, and the Energy Charter Treaty.

On industry, the council held a debate on the proposed modernisation of the application of the treaty's competition provisions. There was good support for the principle of the reforms, although some caution over legal certainty of the role of competition authorities. There was general support for measures on structural remedies and, for allowing the Commission to accept commitments. Structural remedies allow authorities to remove the underlying incentive for companies to breach competition law, while the proposed regulation contains provisions which would make legally enforceable companies' commitments to the Commission to change practices in order to avoid a potential infringement. The Commission also presented its latest annual report on Competition Policy.

There was a discussion on the Commission's White Paper on Chemicals. The council stressed the need to maintain competitiveness in a global industry as well as protect public health and the environment, and the need for a cost effective, transparent and flexible regime. The council highlighted the need to use the dossier to reinforce the internal market; the importance of compliance with WTO rules; and the importance of producing a system that promoted innovation. The Presidency undertook to pass these messages to the Environment Council.

The Commission presented its fourth report on the world shipbuilding market, which indicated that the past year had seen significant growth in new ship orders, mostly to the benefit of South Korean yards. There was continued evidence of Korean yards selling below an economically viable level. The Commission had announced (on 8 May) that failing a bilateral solution with Korea by 30 June, it intended to launch a WTO case and to propose a selective subsidy mechanism to defend EU yards. A defence mechanism should be seen as an exceptional step, and that it was important that it should be carefully targeted on those sectors where there was direct unfair competition from Korea. The council adopted conclusions strongly supporting the intention to launch a WTO case and noting the intention to propose a new subsidy mechanism.

The council adopted conclusions welcoming the Commission's "Go-Digital" initiative, designed to increase awareness among SMEs of e-commerce and break down the barriers that exist to their take-up of e-business.

There was a discussion on the proposals to allow European Coal and Steel Community funds to transfer to the Community when the Treaty expires in 2002. Member states had agreed at Nice to a protocol to provide a legal base allowing the ECSC assets to continue to be used for research to benefit those companies who had contributed to the assets. The protocol needed to be ratified as part of the Nice package before formal decisions could be taken, but the Presidency had taken work forward on some outstanding issues.

Most outstanding issues were resolved at the council: apart from a Danish Parliamentary Scrutiny reserve, all member states were able to support the texts. The Commission also presented its latest report on the monitoring of the Article 95 Steel Aid Cases.

Finally, the council adopted conclusions on the integration of sustainable development and enterprise policy. This recommends progress towards the integration of environment policy into enterprise policy, and that a positive environmental approach could reinforce competitiveness.

Embedded Generation

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to take forward the recommendations of the Ofgem/DTI working party on embedded generation published in January 2001; and if she will make a statement. [1109]

Mr. Wilson: The report of the embedded generation working group set out a number of important recommendations which the Government are keen to see progressed as quickly as possible. I therefore intend to establish a co-ordination group to ensure that the detailed recommendations of the report, many of which are for Ofgem and the industry to pursue, are addressed in a timely and co-ordinated fashion which recognises the interdependent nature of the issues involved. It is hoped that the co-ordination group can begin its work in September and preparatory work is in hand to enable the group to move quickly once it is established.

The DTI Energy Policy Directorate designated embedded generation website at www.dti.gov.uk/energy/egwg/index.htm will continue to publish information on future developments as the group is established.

Cleaner Fuels

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what research she is supporting into less polluting fuels. [410]

Mr. Jamieson: I have been asked to reply.

The Government support a wide range of research into cleaner fuels.

The Department of Trade and Industry spent £11.3 million last year and has a budget of £18 million for this financial year for its programme to support research

and development of new and renewable energy. This includes work on stationary and transport applications of fuel cells including consideration of the fuelling issues.

Following the results of the Green Fuel Challenge announced in Budget 2001, the Government will shortly invite bids for duty exemptions or reductions for pilot projects for fuels including hydrogen, bio-ethanol, methanol and biogas.

The Government are fully engaged in international developments in this area, and actively involved in research sponsored by international organisations, such as the European Commission and the International Energy Agency.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Long-term Unemployment

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has to help tackle long-term unemployment in Nottingham, North constituency. [1943]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: From July 2001 the Nottingham Employment Zone will be extended to cover Bulwell East and Bulwell West in my hon. Friend's constituency. From January 2002 the Nottingham Action Team for Jobs will also be extended so that these two wards will be brought within its scope.

Fraud

Brian White: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of the London borough of Lambeth. [1944]

Malcolm Wicks: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) report was published today in respect of the London borough of Lambeth and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter fraud activities.

BFI inspectors found that the council's administration of these benefits is very poor, and that radical improvements are needed in all but a few areas.

The benefits service has been outsourced to a contractor and, although inspectors consider the terms of the contract are acceptable, the council's management of it has been poor. As a result, the council has failed to eradicate its longstanding, and now, substantial, backlog of work. BFI considers this failure underlies many of the problems that the council now faces.

BFI found that the council compounds its problems by failing to monitor quality, depriving itself of the management information that is needed for improvement.

The report notes the Chief Executive's willingness to accept and implement our recommendations for change demonstrates a commitment to improvement. More recently Lambeth has requested assistance to address its problems from the DWP funded expert help team. The

expert help teams will be working with Lambeth to ensure that they have robust plans for achieving a significantly improved benefits service.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Paul Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Manchester City Council. [1945]

Malcolm Wicks: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of Manchester City council and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter-fraud activities.

Inspectors found that Manchester City council provided a very poor service to claimants, particularly in the time taken to process new claims and changes of circumstances. Considerable backlogs of work had developed, although the report notes the council took steps to deal with the backlog and the situation improved.

The report notes some weaknesses in the verification of new claims and in renewal cases the council focused on ensuring that payment was made rather than making sure that the determination was correct.

Inspectors found weaknesses in the council's counter fraud strategy and concluded that the counter fraud team was under resourced. There were also weaknesses in the identification and classification of overpayments, and the recovery of overpayments was very poor.

Inspectors consider a good number of the problems would have been avoided if the council had planned and managed better the major changes it made in 1999–2000 and earlier.

However, the reports notes the council has said that it has made management and operational changes to address the weaknesses identified by the inspection, especially in work prioritisation, structure, communications and recruitment.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Lincoln City council. [1946]

Malcolm Wicks: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of Lincoln City council and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter fraud activities.

Inspectors found that Lincoln City Council was providing a satisfactory gateway to the benefit systems by ensuring that appropriate verification action was taken before determining claims.

However, there were several areas where the council was not providing a satisfactory or secure service. BFI considers many weaknesses were the result of a long standing backlog of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit work and a lack of good quality management information. Weaknesses included renewal claims not being dealt with promptly, benefit periods being incorrectly set and referrals to the Rent Officer being delayed.

The report notes the council has a prosecution policy but fails to adhere to it. Management and control of counter fraud work was weak, and inspectors found that the council was over-claiming weekly benefit savings.

Apart from the lack of a strategy to clear the backlog of work, the BFI found the council had no clear strategies covering overpayment recovery or its visiting programme.

The report concludes that the council must tackle the backlog of work by producing a clear strategy based on sound management information.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how much was spent on countering fraud in Family Credit, and what the estimated savings were in the last three years; [1149]

(2) what his Department spent countering fraud in (a) Income Support and (b) Jobseeker's Allowance, in nominal terms and expressed as a percentage of the relevant benefit expenditure, in the last three years. [1150]

Malcolm Wicks: The Department set out its strategy for tackling fraud and error in the paper—A new contract for welfare: Safeguarding Social Security (CM 4276)—published on 23 March 1999. The overall aim of the strategy is to have a benefit system which is secure from first claim to final payment.

The implementation of this strategy means that an anti-fraud focus is integral to the work of the Department, as is dealing with the wider agenda of error and incorrectness in benefit payments. It is therefore not possible to account for the cost of anti-fraud work separately.

Family Credit was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit in October 1999. This Tax Credit is administered by the Inland Revenue.

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if the checks made on continuing claims for benefit with respect to National Insurance are done through access to Inland Revenue records. [1153]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The checks referred to in my noble Friend the then Minister for State's written answer on 11 May 2001, *Official Report*, columns 387–88W are

conducted by Benefits Agency staff on continuing claims to Income Support (IS) or Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). Requests for verification are made either to the claimant for documentary evidence in the form of wage slips or pay statements or to the employer or pension provider directly with the claimant's consent. This provides written confirmation of gross pay, details of deductions for tax and National Insurance (NI) and net pay. Where there appears to be a discrepancy in the amount of deductions taken, further inquiries are made to the customer or employer/pension provider.

There are no formal arrangements for the Department to access or check Inland Revenue records.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will set out his strategy for identifying those who have failed to claim their entitlement for Winter Fuel Payments in the winters of (a) 1997–98, (b) 1998–99 and (c) 1999–2000; and if he will set out the reasons for which a deadline was applied to claims for winter 2000–01. [1158]

Mr. McCartney: An information campaign, beginning in April 2000, aimed to ensure that existing and potential customers were aware of the changes to the scheme and what, if any, action was required. It has included: advertisements in national and local press; a leaflet and poster, made available in a variety of venues, including local social security offices, post offices, supermarkets and doctors' surgeries; a dedicated Winter Fuel Payment Helpline; and information on the internet. A mailshot was also undertaken, beginning in early May 2000, to people we could identify as being newly eligible, with an invitation to make a claim.

The deadline imposed for winter 2000 payments allowed a period for claiming of almost a year from when the information campaign began, it is not unreasonable to assume that those who want to claim have claimed.

Legislation covering Winter Fuel Payments states that for winter 2000–01 claims had to be made before 31 March 2001. This does not apply to the retrospective years 1997–98, 1998–99, 1999–2000.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate the value of unclaimed Winter Fuel Payments for the winter of 2000–01 and the number of entitled recipients who failed to claim their entitlement by the 31 March deadline. [1159]

Mr. McCartney: We received and paid around 1.3 million Winter Fuel Payment claims for last winter. We estimated that up to 1.5 million people could have been eligible who would need to claim. Because this figure is an estimate, it is not possible to provide a reliable figure of either the value of unclaimed payments, or of those who did not claim.

Overall, including those made automatically, over 11 million payments were made last winter.

Pensioners

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will set out the basis for his oral statement of 25 June 2001, *Official Report*, column 372, about the number of pensioners who will benefit from the proposed

pension credit; and if that total includes pensioners with no private pension income who receive the minimum income guarantee. [1160]

Mr. McCartney: I refer the hon. Member to "The Pension Credit: A consultation paper" (Nov 2000, Cm 4900).

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much it is expected to cost to establish the Pension Service. [370]

Mr. McCartney: The Government's current spending plans (Spending Review 2000: New Public Spending Plans 2001–04 Cm4807) provide funds for extensive improvements to the services this Department offers to its customers. Establishing the new Pension Service will form a key part of this modernisation programme.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people have bought a stakeholder pension in each month since they first became available; and what proportion of these were bought on behalf of someone else. [376]

Mr. McCartney: The information requested is not yet available.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if Jobcentre Plus and the Pension Service will have their own dedicated websites. [369]

Mr. McCartney: Jobcentre Plus and the Pension Service will have their own dedicated websites.

Information about both organisations is already available through either the Department's or the Employment Service's websites.

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimate he has made of the number of people who claim minimum income guarantee as a result of the take-up campaign. [919]

Mr. McCartney: The take-up campaign has so far resulted in 110,286 successful claims to the minimum income guarantee. The average additional income is £20 per week.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how people in long-term residential care who are (a) state-funded and (b) self-funded will benefit from the introduction of the pension credit. [1260]

Mr. McCartney: The pension credit forms a key part of the Government's overall strategy for tackling pensioner poverty.

We are in the process of completing the design of the credit and will publish details of our proposals when the Bill is introduced.

Severe Disablement Allowance

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how many claims were made for Severe Disablement Allowance in each of the 12 months up to and including March 2001; [1157]

(2) how many (a) claims and (b) awards have been made for Severe Disablement Allowance in each of the 12 months up to and including March 2001. [1161]

Malcolm Wicks: The available information is set out in the table.

	New claims to Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA)	Severe Disablement Allowance awards
April 2000	3,459	1,100
May 2000	3,884	800
June 2000	3,966	1,300
July 2000	3,830	1,200
August 2000	4,172	900
September 2000	4,226	1,000
October 2000	4,418	1,000
November 2000	4,537	800
December 2000	3,122	1,000
January 2001	4,022	900
February 2001	3,962	700
March 2001	4,788	n/a

n/a = Not available

Note:

Information on the number of awards commencing in March 2001 is not yet available as these figures are derived from quarterly data, not due to be released until September 2001.

Source:

New claims figures are from 100 per cent. counts supplied by the Central Data Unit and are subject to change.

Figures for SDA awards are taken from 5 per cent. samples of the PSCS(INCAP) benefit computer system, and exclude a small number of cases held clerically. These figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

Housing Benefit

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimates he has made of the administrative costs of Housing Benefit for each London borough for each of the past three years. [1046]

Malcolm Wicks: The annual expenditure on Housing Benefit administration reported by London local authorities for the last three years for which figures are available are given in the table.

	£000		
Local authority	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000
Barking and Dagenham	496	654	935
Barnet	1,869	2,086	1,665
Bexley	506	457	494
Brent	3,670	3,820	3,528
Bromley	1,778	1,680	1,561
Camden	3,291	3,169	3,274
City of London	232	263	204
Croydon	1,998	2,050	2,223
Ealing	3,745	4,177	3,807
Enfield	2,571	2,382	2,433
Greenwich	4,739	3,881	4,256
Hackney	5,600	4,529	5,069
Hammersmith and Fulham	2,935	2,832	2,821
Haringey	5,428	5,634	7,243
Harrow	985	1,191	1,122
Havering	915	1,021	1,059
Hillingdon	1,538	1,143	1,151

	£000		
Local authority	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000
Hounslow	1,104	1,235	1,455
Islington	3,814	1,586	2,839
Kensington and Chelsea	3,690	3,090	2,750
Kingston upon Thames	485	484	548
Lambeth	5,052	3,679	3,938
Lewisham	6,167	7,227	6,138
Merton	664	684	906
Newham	7,363	7,691	5,581
Redbridge	1,932	2,538	2,031
Richmond upon Thames	976	853	845
Southwark	3,915	5,447	6,638
Sutton	1,209	1,190	1,280
Tower Hamlets	2,275	2,658	2,752
Waltham Forest	1,639	1,897	3,323
Wandsworth	2,096	2,101	2,447
Westminster	4,886	4,986	4,618

Source:

Reported expenditure to the DTLR on form R04.

Jobcentre Plus

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much it is expected to cost to establish Jobcentre Plus; and how much revenue is expected to be raised by selling off premises that are vacated as a result of the merger between the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency. [650]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Our plans for introducing Jobcentre Plus are still developing. For this reason the information requested is not yet available.

Benefits Expenditure

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his Department's most recent estimates are for expenditure on (a) Disability Living Allowance, (b) Attendance Allowance, (c) Severe Disablement Allowance, (d) the short-term component of Incapacity Benefit, (e) the long-term component of Incapacity Benefit and (f) the earnings-related component of Incapacity Benefit for (i) 2000-01, (ii) 2001-02 and (iii) 2002-03. [1154]

Maria Eagle: The information is in the table.

Government expenditure plans 2000-01 to 2002-03

	£ million		
	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03
Disability Living Allowance	6,044	6,511	6,877
Attendance Allowance	2,946	3,094	3,174
Severe Disablement Allowance	1,014	1,020	959
Incapacity Benefit—short term	563	546	570
Incapacity Benefit—long term	5,329	5,430	5,532
Incapacity Benefit—AP	644	552	474

Note:

Figures are consistent with Departmental Report 2001

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his Department's original forecasts were for expenditure on (a) Disability Living Allowance, (b) Attendance Allowance, (c) Severe Disablement Allowance, (d) the short-term component of Incapacity Benefit, (e) the long-term component of Incapacity Benefit and (f) the earnings-related component of Incapacity Benefit for (i) 1999-2000, (ii) 2000-01, (iii) 2001-02 and (iv) 2002-03. [1162]

Maria Eagle: The information is in the table.

Government expenditure plans 1999–2000 to 2001–02

	£ million		
	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Disability Living Allowance	5,630	5,823	6,282
Attendance Allowance	2,841	2,916	3,078
Severe Disablement Allowance	1,011	1,017	1,029
<i>Incapacity Benefit</i>			
Short-term	560	557	510
Long-term	5,564	5,579	5,836
AP	751	641	563

Notes:

1. Figures are consistent with Departmental Report 2000.
2. No projected expenditure for 2002–03 was made in Departmental Report 2000.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his Department's actual expenditure was on (a) Disability Living Allowance, (b) Attendance Allowance, (c) Severe Disablement Allowance, (d) the short-term component of Incapacity Benefit, (e) the long-term component of Incapacity Benefit and (f) the earnings-related component of Incapacity Benefit for (i) 1999–2001 and (ii) 2000–01. [1163]

Maria Eagle: The information is in the table.

Government expenditure 1999–2000 to 2000–01

	1999–2000	2000–01
Disability Living Allowance	5,660	6,044
Attendance Allowance	2,823	2,946
Severe Disablement Allowance	1,006	1,014
<i>Incapacity Benefit</i>		
Short-term	547	563
Long-term	5,492	5,329
AP	753	644

Notes:

1. Figures are consistent with Departmental Report 2001.
2. Figures for 1999–2000 are outturn.
3. Figures for 2000–01 are estimated outturn.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will produce an updated set of tables in the same terms as those at the back of the last DSS departmental report (Cm 4614) to outline the future expenditure plans of his new Department. [373]

Mr. Darling: The creation of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) brings together former Department of Social Security spending plans, less that relating to War Pensions, with those for the employment functions of the former Department for Employment and Education (DfEE) (including the whole of the Employment Service). Work is continuing to quantify precise funding, particularly in relation to administration, and full details will be published in the next Departmental Report. However, previously published information relating to benefit expenditure (to be found in the Department of Social Security Departmental Report, Cm 5115, and in additional information placed in the Library, and on 1 May 2001, *Official Report*, column 594W remains correct except for war pensions, which are transferred to the Ministry of Defence.

DWP will assume responsibility from DfEE for some £2.3 billion funding, including around £0.8 billion from the Employment Opportunities Fund. Further details are on page 148 of the DfEE Departmental Report (Cm 5102). In addition there will be transfers from DfEE in respect of headquarters staff.

DWP will also be transferring some £24 million to the Ministry of Defence in relation to the administration of war pensions, including the cost of the War Pensions Agency.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

UN Human Rights Treaty Monitoring

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what (a) the deadline dates for submission of UK periodic report obligations under the United Nations system and (b) the expected dates and location of sessions of supervisory and reporting bodies are for each of the next five years. [1146]

Peter Hain: As part of its commitment to promote human rights, the UK takes seriously its obligations to submit regular and comprehensive reports to the six UN Human Rights Treaty Monitoring Bodies. Wherever possible, the UK submits reports which cover the Metropolitan Territories, as well as the Crown Dependent Territories and the Overseas Territories.

The UK's Fifth Periodic Report under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) was submitted to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in August 1999. The UK's Sixth Report is due in August 2004.

The UK's Fourth Periodic Report under the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights (ICESCR) was submitted to the OHCHR in December 2000. The UK's Fifth Report is due in 2005—a specific deadline has not yet been set by the OHCHR.

The UK's Third Periodic Report under the Convention Against Torture (CAT) was submitted in April 1998. Government Departments are currently compiling the UK's Fourth Report which is due in January 2002.

The UK's Fifteenth Periodic Report under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) was submitted in August 1999. A separate report covering the Overseas Territories was submitted in February 2000. The UK's Sixteenth Report (which will be an update on the Fifteenth Report) is currently being compiled and is due to be submitted in August 2001.

The UK's Second Periodic Report under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was submitted in August 1999. The UK's Third Periodic Report is due in September 2004.

The UK's Fourth Periodic Report under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was submitted in January 1999. The UK's Fifth Report is due to be submitted in May 2003.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has so far only published a calendar covering Human Rights Committee meetings in 2001. By the end of the year:

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) will have met three times in Geneva (8–26 January; 21 May–8 June; 24 September–12 October).

The Human Rights Committee (HRC) will have met three times, once in New York and twice in Geneva (19 March–6 April, New York; 9–27 July, Geneva; 15 October–2 November, Geneva).

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) will have met three times in Geneva (23 April–11 May; 13–31 August; 12–30 November).

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) will have met twice in New York (15 January–2 April; 2–20 July).

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination (CERD) will have met twice in Geneva (5–23 March; 30 July–17 August).

The Committee Against Torture (CAT) will have met twice in Geneva (30 April–18 May; 12–23 November).

Full details of 2002 meetings will be published on the OHCHR website www.unhchr.ch later in the year.

Special Advisers

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will list his special advisers and their division of responsibilities; [254]

(2) if he will list the special advisers in his Department together with their date of appointment and their responsibilities; which of them are authorised to speak to the media; and if he will make a statement. [251]

Mr. Straw: The FCO Special Advisers are Ed Owen and Michael Williams. They were appointed on 19 June 2001 and are authorised to speak to the media.

Their areas of policy responsibility are:

Ed Owen

- European Union
- Central and Eastern Europe
- Russia
- Cyprus and Turkey
- Gibraltar and Overseas Territories
- Global Environment

Dr. Michael C. Williams

- International Security Policy—including NATO and peacekeeping
- United Nations
- The Balkans
- Africa
- Middle East
- North, South and Central America
- South and East Asia
- Australasia
- Human Rights
- The Commonwealth
- Arms Control and Disarmament.

Arms Embargoes

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the expiry of the UN and EU arms embargoes against Ethiopia and Eritrea. [1711]

Peter Hain: The arms embargo and ban on related technical assistance and training imposed by the United Nations Security Council resolution 1298 (2000) against Ethiopia and Eritrea expired on 16 May 2001. The EU arms embargo imposed against Ethiopia and Eritrea by Common Position 99/206/CFSP expired on 31 May 2001. HMG were content to support the expiry of both the UN and EU embargoes in recognition of the progress made by both parties in the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreements, including the establishment of the Temporary Security Zone.

From 1 June 2001, the Government will consider all applications for a licence to export goods and technology on the Military List on a case by case basis against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria which I announced on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 199–203W. It remains our policy only to sell arms which will not be used for external aggression or internal oppression.

Export Controls (Afghanistan)

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which goods subject to strategic export controls have recently been approved for export to Afghanistan. [1712]

Mr. Bradshaw: The Department of Trade and Industry recently issued an export licence for mine-clearance equipment for use by the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) to assist their demining activities in Afghanistan. The goods are rated as Military Listed. UNSCR 1333 (2000) which imposes inter alia an arms embargo on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan provides scope for the UN Sanctions Committee to approve of non-lethal military equipment intended solely for humanitarian or protective use to Taliban-controlled territory. The Sanctions Committee has given its approval in this case.

The granting of this export licence is fully consistent with the UN Security Council resolutions and does not affect the Government's continued support for the EU common position on arms exports to Afghanistan.

Chagos Islands

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects the environmental impact assessment study of the Chagos Islands to be completed and published. [1052]

Mr. Bradshaw: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by the then Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), on 23 April 2001, *Official Report*, column 124W. Phase 2 studies, which will include general but not specific environmental impact assessments, are expected to be completed within a year.

Antarctic Environmental Protocol

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what actions are being taken by his Department to establish a permanent secretariat for the Antarctic Environmental Protocol signatories. [1056]

Mr. Bradshaw: We are in discussions with a number of Antarctic Treaty Parties on the question of a Secretariat. This is a matter which may arise at the forthcoming Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (9–20 July 2001, St. Petersburg, Russia), though the agenda for that meeting has not yet been confirmed.

General Pinochet

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what monitoring of the legal proceedings against General Pinochet in Chile is being undertaken by his Department. [1051]

Mr. MacShane: Our Embassy in Santiago is keeping the Department informed of developments in the legal proceedings against General Pinochet.

Diego Garcia

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions his Department has held with the US Government concerning the right of return of the Ilois people to Diego Garcia. [1053]

Mr. Bradshaw: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer the then Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), gave to him on 26 April 2001, *Official Report*, columns 337–38W.

Ministerial Responsibilities

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry regarding the responsibilities of the Minister for Trade. [850]

Mr. Straw: Under exemption 2 of Part II of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, information about internal discussions is not disclosed.

Future of Europe

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to launch the UK consultation process for the Future of Europe debate. [851]

Peter Hain: There is already a lively UK debate on the future of Europe. The Government welcome this. As the Prime Minister said in Warsaw in October 2000, the challenge now is to reform the EU so that it delivers real benefits to the people of Europe, addressing the priorities they want addressed; and does so in a way which has their consent and support.

A number of Government initiatives have already been taken to sustain and develop this debate:

The Prime Minister's Warsaw speech laid out the overall approach of the UK Government, inviting others to contribute to the debate. Ministers have regularly addressed EU issues in media appearances and contacts with the public.

The EU section of the Foreign Office website has made available a substantial amount of material on the EU and the UK's place in it, and hosts regular online debates on topical EU issues.

The Government have held a series of parliamentary debates on the EU. There will be further such opportunities as Parliament considers the Bill to ratify the Nice Treaty.

The Government have organised or sponsored a number of public events to solicit the views of academics, civil society and the general public.

The Government's efforts to provide information and seek the public's views will continue in the coming months.

"Your Britain, Your Europe"

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to continue the "Your Britain, Your Europe" campaign; and what budget has been set for this initiative. [852]

Peter Hain: The FCO will continue to meet its public service commitment to inform the UK public about the EU. The costs of this will be met from within the FCO's central budget.

Middle East

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he discussed the proposals for peace in the middle east put forward by the director of the CIA during his recent visit to Gothenburg. [853]

Mr. Bradshaw: Ongoing efforts to build on the fragile ceasefire in the middle east featured prominently in discussion at both the EU-US summit on 14 June and the European Council on 15–16 June in Gothenburg. The UK welcomes the agreement by the parties to CIA Director Tenet's proposals for consolidating the ceasefire, and making progress on security issues. It is now essential that the ceasefire and further security measures be followed swiftly by work on confidence-building measures and the renewal of a political process, which together form the complete package of the recommendations of the Mitchell Committee.

Ballistic Missile Defence

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with representatives of the EU and the US on the issue of ballistic missile defence; and if he will make a statement. [854]

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State discussed issues related to ballistic missile defence with his US and other NATO counterparts at the special meeting of the North Atlantic Council on June 13. Alliance leaders welcomed the extensive programme of consultations undertaken by the US on how best to counter the emerging threat posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their missile delivery systems.

Rebuttal Unit

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the status of his Department's rebuttal unit on EU issues. [855]

Peter Hain: Government Ministers will continue to write letters aimed at correcting press articles on Europe which are misleading and/or factually inaccurate, just as they would do on any other issue.

Macedonia

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he had during his recent visit to Gothenburg regarding the situation in Macedonia. [857]

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has wide-ranging discussions on Macedonia with colleagues both during the European Council and the preceding EU/US summit in Gothenburg. The European Council decided to appoint a high level EU representative to be resident in Macedonia under the authority of EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana. The Conclusions of the Gothenburg Council, including the Declaration on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (Annexe II), were placed in the Library of the House on Monday 18 June.

Nice Treaty

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on (a) the conclusions of the Gothenburg Summit as they relate to the Irish referendum on the Nice treaty and (b) how the process of enlargement will be pursued. [858]

Peter Hain: The 11 June General Affairs Council expressed regret at the result of the Irish referendum on the Treaty of Nice, while respecting the will of the Irish people. The GAC noted that the Irish Government are deeply and firmly committed to the EU and to the ratification of the Treaty of Nice. The Fourteen expressed their readiness to contribute in every possible way to help the Irish Government find a way forward, taking into account the concerns reflected by this result, without reopening the text of the Nice treaty.

The Gothenburg European Council confirmed these conclusions, and reaffirmed that the ratification process for the Treaty of Nice will continue so that the Union is in a position to welcome new member states from the end of 2002.

Heads of State and Government also agreed that, provided progress towards meeting the accession criteria continues at an unabated pace, the enlargement road map should make it possible to complete negotiations by the end of 2002 for those candidate countries that are ready. The objective is that they should participate in the 2004 European Parliament elections as members.

Ministerial Meetings (Europe)

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what meetings he has had since his appointment with (a) the President of the European Commission and (b) representatives of the forthcoming Belgian EU Presidency; and if he will make a statement. [859]

Peter Hain: At the General Affairs Council of 11–12 June and the Gothenburg European Council of 15–16 June, the Secretary of State had useful discussions with the President of the Commission and with the Belgian Foreign Minister. The Secretary of State also held a bilateral meeting with the Belgian Foreign Minister in London on 26 June: they discussed a range of issues likely

to feature during the forthcoming Belgian Presidency of the European Union. I have also held bilateral talks with my Belgian counterpart to discuss Presidency issues.

Qualified Majority Voting

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if it remains the Government's policy that qualified majority voting should not be extended to border controls, defence, taxation, social security, own resources matters and treaty amendments. [956]

Peter Hain: As our manifesto made clear, we shall keep the veto on vital matters of national sovereignty.

HEALTH

Tuberculosis

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the need to empower hospitals to restrict the movement of infectious in-patients suffering from TB; and if he will make a statement. [59]

Yvette Cooper: The Department of Health has published recommendations on the requirement for managing patients—including isolation—with tuberculosis and drug resistant tuberculosis in two documents. One was published in June 1996 entitled "Recommendations for the prevention and control of tuberculosis at local level" and, again, in September 1998 recommendations were made in the document entitled "UK guidance on the prevention and control of transmission of HIV-related tuberculosis and Drug-resistant, including Multiple Drug-resistant tuberculosis". Both of these publications are available in the Library.

NHS Appointments Commission

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he will give to the NHS Appointments Commission to ensure that suitable nominations are received from the voluntary sector. [13]

Jacqui Smith: Experience in the voluntary sector is valued on National Health Service boards and we remain keen to encourage people with such expertise to apply.

I understand that the NHS Appointments Commission will be routinely writing to appropriate councils for voluntary service with copies of its recruitment advertisements and asking them to draw these to the attention of their member organisations.

NHS (Surrey)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the current financial deficit of Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust; and if he will make a statement. [145]

Ms Blears [holding answer 25 June 2001]: Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust reported a provisional income and expenditure deficit of £1.5 million at the end of March 2001 (this figure is subject to confirmation in the trust's final accounts). In order to secure financial balance the trust has to address this deficit and meet a

savings target. This means that the trust is reporting a provisional income and expenditure deficit at the beginning of this financial year of £4.0 million.

The South East Regional Office, East Surrey health authority and local primary care groups are working with the trust to agree a plan which will deliver long-term financial stability and ensure access targets are met.

Pithing Ban

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the pithing ban. [211]

Yvette Cooper [holding answer 25 June 2001]: I am advised by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) that the ban on pithing came into force on 1 April 2001 in Great Britain and on 11 June 2001 in Northern Ireland, where pithing has not been practiced for some years.

The ban is enforced in Great Britain by the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS). The FSA has asked the MHS to monitor compliance with the ban and to report any potential closure of abattoirs arising from it. The MHS reports that, as at 11 June 2001, only 13 abattoirs were still pithing. Of these, 10 are expected to cease pithing by 1 July. Officials of the MHS and the Meat and Livestock Commission have met operators who believe they are unable to comply with the ban and have provided advice on how premises and working practices may be adapted to enable them to do so. The MHS has not received any reports of increased incidence of worker injury since the ban came into effect.

Cervical Cancer Screening

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of total funds available to the cancer screening programme are available to the cervical cancer screening programme; and what that proportion is in cash terms. [302]

Yvette Cooper [holding answer 26 June 2001]: In 1998, the National Audit Office (NAO) estimated that the National Health Service cervical screening programme in England costs around £132 million per year, around £34 per woman screened¹.

It is estimated by the Department of Health that the NHS breast cancer screening programme costs £52 million per year.

There are currently no other national NHS programmes for cancer screening. The NHS plan stated that we will introduce new screening programmes for other cancers, as evidence about their effectiveness and benefit is confirmed.

¹ Source:

NAO "The performance of the NHS cervical screening programme in England"; report by the Comptroller and Auditor General; HC678 session 1997-98; 22 April 1998.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to publish the ninth annual report of the National Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Surveillance Unit. [1710]

Mr. Milburn: The National Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Surveillance Unit's ninth annual report will be published tomorrow. The report documents the Unit's findings in relation to sporadic, familial and iatrogenic Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD), and also variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD), up to 31 December 2000. Copies will be placed in the Library, and made available on the Unit's website at www.cjd.ed.ac.uk.

General Social Care Council

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when the General Social Care Council will publish the time-scales for registering each category of social care worker; [1177]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 25 June 2001, *Official Report*, column 24W, on the General Social Care Council, if he will list each category of social care worker it is planned to register and how many (a) there are in total in each category and (b) are qualified; [1262]

(3) pursuant to his answer of 25 June 2001, *Official Report*, column 24W, on the General Social Care Council, if he will set out his reasons for not requiring the General Social Care Council to develop an interim register that covers all unqualified social care workers. [1261]

Jacqui Smith: The General Social Care Council will begin its work in October 2001. It is our intention to ask the Council to register qualified social workers first, beginning in 2002-03, followed by residential childcare workers and managers of care homes.

The council will specify any levels of training expected of registrants other than social workers. It will need to consider the priorities for registration and the likely overall timetable.

Registration of the work force is only one strand in our plans to raise standards in social care and improving public protection. The GSCC will be publishing codes of practice for social care workers and their employers. Compliance with the code is required of all staff and employers whether registered with the council or not. Compliance with the codes will be a first step towards achieving registration.

There are an estimated one million people working in social care and 80 per cent. of them are thought not to have any qualifications. 60 per cent. of the work force are in the independent sector working for around 25,000 employers, many of whom are very small. We do not hold information about the numbers in any particular group.

Food Labelling

Jim Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made in improving food labelling. [594]

Yvette Cooper: The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has adopted a wide-ranging action plan to tackle the issues consumers have identified as priorities for improving food labelling. The FSA is pressing for changes to European law and international standards and has established a number of working groups to explore the potential for voluntary improvements.

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve the regulations covering the clarity of food labelling. [595]

Yvette Cooper: We are committed to giving consumers more choice by improving food labelling. The Food Labelling Regulations 1996 require key labelling information to be easily visible, easy to understand, legible and indelible.

The Food Standards Agency has established a working group to advise on ways of making labels clearer and easier to use. The working group is currently analysing

information about consumer needs and discussing options for improvements with a view to drawing up advice on best practice.

NHS Staff

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the countries of origin of staff first employed by the NHS in the past year. [1152]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not held centrally. Information on the countries of origin of staff registered to work as healthcare professionals is held by the relevant regulatory body. A list of regulatory bodies is in the table.

Regulatory Bodies contact details

Regulatory Body	Address	Contact	Contact
UKCC—United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing	23 Portland Place, London W1N 4JT	CE/Registrar: Sue Norman	President: Alison Norman
GMC—General Medical Council	178 Great Portland Street, London W1N 6JE	President: Sir Donald Irvine	Registrar: Finlay Scott
RPSGB—Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain	1 Lambeth High Street, London SE1 7JN	Secretary/Registrar: Anne Lewis	President: Mr. P. L. Marshall Davies
CPSM—Council for the Professions Supplementary to Medicine	Park House, 184 Kennington Park Road, London SE11 4BU	Chair Professor: Brian Edwards	Registrar: Mike Hall
GDC—General Dental Council	37 Wimpole Street, London W1M 8DQ	President: Professor Nairn Wilson	CE/Registrar: Antony Townsend
GOC—General Optical Council	41 Harley Street, London W1G 8DJ	Chair: Rosie Varley	Registrar (from 2 January 2000): Peter Coe
ROStC—Royal Osteopathic Council	Osteopathy House, 176 Tower Bridge, London SE1 3LU	Chair: Nigel Clarke	CE/Registrar: Madeleine Craggs
GChC—General Chiropractic Council	3rd Floor North, 344–354 Grays Inn Road, London WC1X 8BP	Chair: Norma Morris	Registrar: Margaret Coats

Organ Register

Ms Stuart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will break down by region for each of the last 12 months the additions to the organ register. [236]

Jacqui Smith: The information is shown in the table.

New applications to the Organ Donor Register where signature date between 1 June 2000–31 May 2001, by NHS region

Month of registration	Thousand				
	Northern and Yorkshire	Trent	Eastern	London	South East
2000					
June	13.3	11.1	12.4	14.7	20.4
July	18.4	9.9	10.6	12.9	17.3
August	21.1	5.9	7.9	10.3	19.2
September	32.0	21.8	23.2	24.8	50.7
October	17.9	15.5	17.5	19.4	29.4
November	12.1	10.3	11.3	13.5	17.8
December	9.1	8.5	9.0	10.2	13.5
2001					
January	13.2	12.1	13.9	15.0	20.7
February	12.4	10.4	13.5	13.0	18.0
March	14.3	12.1	15.6	15.7	22.3
April	10.4	9.0	11.2	11.4	16.5
May	10.0	8.8	10.2	11.3	15.9
Total number	184.2	135.4	156.3	172.2	261.7
Percentage of new applications	11.8	8.6	10.0	11.0	16.7
Percentage of ODR total	10.0	8.8	9.4	10.9	14.8
Percentage population	10.8	8.7	9.0	12.0	14.5

Month of registration	South West	West Midlands	North West	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
2000						
June	13.5	9.8	13.1	4.9	12.6	0.2
July	11.5	8.6	11.7	4.3	10.5	0.4
August	16.3	5.3	7.8	2.5	7.2	0.2
September	35.7	16.9	26.7	8.6	18.7	0.2
October	21.0	14.1	17.3	6.7	16.5	1.0
November	12.3	8.7	11.3	4.2	10.6	0.8
December	8.8	6.5	8.3	3.1	8.3	0.5
2001						
January	13.3	10.1	13.0	4.8	12.2	0.5
February	12.4	9.0	11.6	4.1	10.6	0.4
March	17.7	13.3	16.5	5.2	12.2	0.9
April	11.1	9.2	11.2	3.5	10.2	0.4
May	10.5	7.7	9.5	3.4	8.1	0.2
Total number	184.1	119.2	158.0	55.3	137.7	5.7
Percentage of new applications	11.7	7.6	10.1	3.5	8.8	0.4
Percentage of ODR total	10.1	7.4	11.0	5.4	9.6	1.7
Percentage population	8.3	9.0	11.2	5.0	8.7	2.8

Notes:

1. NHS region has been defined by postcode and figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred.
2. Total number of registrations on Organ Donor Register at 25 June 2001 is 8.8 million.

Work-related Stress Disorders

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what further action the Government are intending to take to tackle work-related stress disorders. [415]

Dr. Whitehead: I have been asked to reply.

The Health and Safety Commission has a comprehensive strategy and programme of work to prevent work-related stress and hence the disorders arising from it.

In partnership with other agencies, both within Government and outside, it will develop clear, agreed standards of good management practice for preventing a range of work-related stressors; better equip health and safety inspectors to handle the issue in their routine work; facilitate a more comprehensive approach to managing work-related stress; run a publicity drive to help educate employers about what they can and should be doing to prevent work-related stress; and develop yardsticks against which employers' performance can be measured.

As part of this strategy, new guidance from the Health and Safety Executive called "Tackling Work-related Stress—a Managers' Guide to Improving and Maintaining Employee Health and Well-being", was published on 25 June 2001. A copy of the guidance has been placed in the Library of the House.

TREASURY

Low-sulphur Fuel

Mr. Tynan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the environmental impact of the recent cut in duty on low sulphur petrol and cut in ultra-low sulphur diesel. [606]

Mr. Boateng: Environmental impacts of the duty cuts for ultra-low sulphur petrol (ULSP) and ultra-low sulphur diesel (ULSD) announced in Budget 2001 are summarised in Table 6.2 of the "Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 2001". Further information about the promotion of low sulphur fuels through fiscal measures is to be found in the Customs and Excise paper, "Using the tax system to encourage cleaner fuels: the experience of ultra-low sulphur diesel", published in November 2000.

SCOTLAND

Constituency Boundaries

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the Boundary Commission for Scotland has decided when to start a general review of constituencies in Scotland. [1796]

Mrs. Liddell: The Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 requires the Boundary Commission for Scotland to submit its next general report between December 2002 and December 2006 and within these limits the Commission has discretion when to start a general review. The Commission, in the exercise of its discretion, will give notice in the *Edinburgh Gazette* tomorrow, 29 June 2001, of its intention to commence forthwith a general review of constituencies in Scotland.

Regulation of Care (Scotland Bill)

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans she has to use her powers of intervention under the Scotland Act 1998 in relation to the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Bill. [1920]

Mrs. Liddell: The Scottish Parliament made a number of amendments to other enactments at Stage 2 of the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Bill, including an amendment to the Finance Act 2000. That amendment relates to a reserved matter, and is outwith the

Parliament's legislative competence. I will rectify this by means of an Order to be made shortly under Section 107 of the Scotland Act. The use of this approach has the full agreement of the First Minister of Scotland.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Foot and Mouth

15. Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on foot and mouth. [584]

Margaret Beckett: The outbreak continues in a small number of areas in the country and the average number of confirmed outbreaks is now between four to five cases per day. It is vitally important that we continue to bear down on the disease and that all concerned maintain the highest standards of biosecurity on and around farms.

18. Lawrie Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement about the impact of recent foot and mouth outbreaks on the rural economy of the North Yorkshire moors with special reference to the measures proposed to regenerate small local businesses in the North Yorkshire national park. [589]

Margaret Beckett: As I saw on my visit to North Yorkshire earlier this week, foot and mouth disease has had a major impact on the wider rural economy, and particularly on important tourist areas such as the North Yorkshire Moors. We are helping small rural businesses in these areas through deferral of tax and VAT, hardship rate relief and through the regional development agency Business Recovery Fund.

26. Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what is the total sum of money made available in compensation payments, to date, to farmers as a result of the foot and mouth outbreak. [603]

Margaret Beckett: Up to 21 June, a total of £803 million has been paid out to farmers in Great Britain in compensation for slaughter of animals and destruction of other items, as a result of the foot and mouth outbreak.

27. Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make it her policy to establish a public inquiry into the Government's handling of foot and mouth disease. [604]

Margaret Beckett: It is right that we consider carefully the issues connected with the foot and mouth outbreak. The question of whether there should be a public inquiry as such, is one for the Prime Minister.

David Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many premises classified as infected with foot and mouth disease in each county of (a) England and (b) Scotland have proved not to be infected; and how many cattle and sheep were involved. [785]

Mr. Morley: An infected premises is one where foot and mouth disease has either been diagnosed by a vet on the farm, supported by convincing clinical evidence, or where disease is found after testing. However, a negative

laboratory result does not necessarily mean that the disease was not present and does not change the status of an infected premises confirmed on clinical diagnosis.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the impact of the foot and mouth crisis on the veterinary sector. [344]

Mr. Morley: No formal assessment has been made, but it is evident that the situation is mixed. Some veterinary surgeons operating in large animal practices will have been unable to carry out much of their normal work because of foot and mouth disease restrictions. However, many of those affected will have carried out work related to the outbreak on behalf of this Department.

Mr. Roger Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will commission an inquiry into the 2001 foot and mouth outbreak. [574]

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will initiate a public inquiry into the cause and handling of the foot and mouth epidemic. [586]

Mrs. Beckett: It is right that we consider very carefully the issues connected with the foot and mouth outbreak. The question of whether there should be a public inquiry as such, is one for the Prime Minister.

Tenant Farmers

16. Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions she has had with representatives of tenant farmers on the situation in agriculture; and if she will make a statement. [585]

Mr. Morley: Since her appointment, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not yet had the opportunity to have specific discussions with representatives of tenant farmers, but my noble Friend Lord Whitty met tenant farmers last week to discuss various issues.

Recycling

17. Mr. Illsley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what proposals she has to include the recovery and recycling of wood in the packaging waste regulations. [587]

Mr. Morley: From 1 January 2000 all packaging materials, including wood, were covered by the requirements of the Regulations. For wood there is a recovery obligation only. This can be met by recycling, composting or incineration with energy recovery.

Kyoto Protocol

19. Mr. McFall: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent discussions she has had with the US Administration on the Kyoto targets. [591]

Margaret Beckett: We have discussed the issue of climate change with the US at all levels. The Prime Minister discussed climate change with President Bush

and EU colleagues in Gothenburg. The Summit agreed to establish a high level group of representatives to consider how the EU and US can co-operate on climate change.

22. Kevin Brennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the environmental consequences of the Kyoto protocol not being ratified by the United States Government. [599]

Margaret Beckett: Kyoto without the US is clearly a second best option. But Kyoto remains the best framework for global action. It will of course be important to keep the door open to the US to come on board later.

Pollution

20. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures she intends to introduce to reduce pollution in industrialised areas. [592]

Mr. Morley: The Government are determined to tackle pollution from industry in a cost-effective and proportionate way. Emissions to air, water and land from major industrial sources are tightly controlled under the Integrated Pollution Control system and the new Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control system. Strong new rules are now in place to make sure that companies take proper responsibility for dealing with legacies of land contamination from the past.

Food Surplus (EU Expansion)

21. Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the impact on food surplus production of the proposed expansion of the EU. [596]

Margaret Beckett: The impact of EU enlargement on agricultural production and consumption will depend on a number of different factors including the terms of accession, which have yet to be negotiated. But, in very general terms, surplus production would be expected to rise. This would strengthen the case for further CAP reform.

Pig Industry

23. Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the prospects for the pig industry. [600]

Mr. Morley: Like all livestock sectors, the pig industry is going through a difficult time, mainly as a result of the foot and mouth outbreak. Once exports markets are open, and if the industry makes full use of the assistance provided by the Ongoers element of the Government's Pig Industry Restructuring Scheme, the medium term prospects will look more promising.

Farming Support

24. Mike Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the value for money obtained for support to the farming industry in each of the last five years. [601]

Margaret Beckett: Funding in support of the Action Plan for Farming will be subject to evaluation in partnership with our rural, farming, food and retail industry stakeholders. The England Rural Development Programme will receive a mid-term evaluation in 2003. An annual programme of evaluations is carried out of different policy programmes; details and copies of reports are on DEFRA's website <http://www.defra.gov.uk/>

However the vast majority of support to farmers over the last five years has been through CAP direct payments. Despite the achievements of the Agenda 2000 agreement, the Government do not believe that the CAP offers good value for money either to taxpayers, consumers or to the UK economy. We want to see further radical reform to secure a more economically rational CAP which is sustainable in relation to the countryside environment and rural economies.

Rural Economy

25. Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the role will be of the proposed independent commission on the rural economy. [602]

Mr. Morley: The Labour Party manifesto gave a commitment to set up an Independent Commission to advise on how we create a sustainable, competitive and diverse farming and food sector within a thriving rural economy which enhances environmental, health and animal welfare goals. An announcement will be made on the role and terms of reference when decisions have been taken.

29. Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on her responsibilities for the rural economy. [608]

Mr. Morley: The Government's objective is to facilitate the development of dynamic, competitive and sustainable economies in the countryside, tackling poverty in rural areas and this is a key priority for my Department. We will be working closely with the Regional Development Agencies, the Countryside Agency, local authorities and other partners including the food and farming industries to achieve this.

Cod Recovery Programme

28. Mr. Blizard: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on policy relating to the next year of the cod recovery programme. [605]

Mr. Morley: In view of the advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas the United Kingdom is fully supportive of the need to develop recovery programmes for North Sea cod, West of Scotland cod, Irish Sea cod as well as for Northern hake. Most recently the European Commission (on behalf of the Member States) reached an agreement with Norway on the steps to be taken for the second stage of the North Sea cod recovery programme. A copy of the Agreed Record dated 21 June 2001 has been placed in the Library of the House.

Livestock Markets (Wales)

30. Hywel Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions she has had with the National Assembly for Wales about the reopening of the livestock markets in Wales. [609]

Margaret Beckett: I shall shortly be meeting Ministers from the devolved Administrations. My officials are in ongoing contact with the National Assembly's Agriculture and Rural Developments on a wide range of foot and mouth disease issues, including the impact of the disease on the livestock and related sectors.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she plans to issue regulations to amend the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994 in the light of the provisions of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000; and when she intends to issue regulations for the appeals which may arise on sites of special scientific interest. [1797]

Mr. Meacher: I have today issued two consultation papers, firstly about amendments to the Habitats Regulations and secondly proposing new appeals regulations, following commencement of Part III of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. In what is largely a technical amendment, the 1994 Habitats Regulations are to be brought in line with the provisions of the Act for protection of SSSIs. Ministers also promised the House that they would prepare regulations for the appeals that may arise on SSSIs (against refusal of consent, management notices and stop notices). These will set out a clear procedure for the conduct of appeals, so that they may be processed efficiently.

The consultation period for both documents ends on 23 August 2001. Copies will be placed in the House Libraries.

Departmental Title Change Costs

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the expenditure incurred in introducing the title of her Department. [392]

Mr. Morley [holding answer 26 June 2001]: Expenditure incurred to date in introducing the title of the new Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is as follows:

Title	£ ¹
Conceptual design, graphics and photography	7,177
Design/production/installation of signs and graphic panels	19,560
Printing	21,804
Miscellaneous	950

¹ All figures are exclusive of VAT

Abattoirs

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many abattoirs closed in each of the last 20 years. [66]

Mr. Morley: The numbers of licensed red meat abattoirs in England in 1980–2000 were:

	Number of licensed red meat abattoirs in England
1980	960
1981	910
1982	840
1983	875
1984	860
1985	850
1986	815
1987	795
1988	780
1989	690
1990	645
1991	595
1992	540
1993	434
1994	424
1995	402
1996	384
1997	375
1998	360
1999	339
2000	316

Correspondence

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she expects to reply to the letter to her predecessor from the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, dated 3 May about compensation in respect of pigs for Mr. I. Thompson, of Red Row, Morpeth. [1174]

Mr. Morley: I replied to the letter from the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed on 26 June 2001.

Countryside Stewardship Scheme

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on further plans to encourage countryside conservation and the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. [R] [590]

Mr. Morley: My Department will have a crucial role in promoting conservation of the countryside. Under the England Rural Development Programme our spending on the Countryside Stewardship Scheme is projected to rise from around £51 million in the current financial year to £126 million in 2006–07.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what changes are proposed to the departmental expenditure limit for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Intervention Board for 2001–02. [1799]

Mr. Morley: Despite the formation of the new Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Supplementary Estimates must still be made in the name of the former Ministry until such time as its functions can be transferred by ways of Transfer of Functions Orders. Any changes to the MAFF DEL necessary as a result of the Machinery of Government changes announced

following the general election on 7 June will be effected later in the year when any necessary Transfer of Functions Orders or other administrative actions are in force.

Subject to parliamentary approval of the Supplementary Estimates the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Intervention Board's joint Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) will be increased by £547,638,000, from £1,185,144,000 to £1,732,782,000.

MAFF's Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) increases by £168,972,000, from £1,059,515,000 to £1,228,487,000 of which resources will increase by £145,182,000 and capital by £23,790,000. There will be a movement from the non-voted element of the DEL of £3,000,000 to the Voted Capital DEL.

For MAFF there is an increase in the administration costs limit of £35,386,000, from £369,799,000 to £405,185,000 and a claim on the DEL Reserve of £188,838,000. This latter comprises the take-up of £42,200,000 resources on administration costs, £69,100,000 resources on programme expenditure, and £7,500,000 capital expenditure for measures to eradicate foot and mouth disease; the take-up of £2,000,000 resources on programme expenditure, and £15,000,000 capital expenditure for flood defence works—being part of the £51 million Flood Defence package announced on 23 November 2000—and £6,600,000 resources on programme expenditure, being part of the £11.6 million package announced on 27 January 2001; the take up of £15,000,000 additional resources on programme

expenditure for the payment of legal costs relating to an European Court of Justice judgment against the UK (Factortame); the take-up of £1,538,000 additional resources on administration costs from the Modernisation Fund in respect of successful projects; the take-up of £14,600,000 resources on programme expenditure in respect of the Agrimonetary Compensation scheme for Livestock Payments announced on 6 March 2001; and the take-up of £640,000 resources on administration costs, £13,810,000 resources on programme expenditure and £850,000 capital expenditure for testing of fallen stock, as an additional BSE control measure.

In addition MAFF is transferring £7,308,000 of non-voted DUP (Departmental Unallocated Provision) to the Food Standards Agency for a small abattoirs scheme. This does not appear in the Estimate.

For the Intervention Board there is an increase in the administration costs limit of £17,181,000, from £35,031,000 to £52,212,000 and a claim on the DEL Reserve of £366,230,000. This latter comprises £300,000,000 for the Livestock Welfare (Disposal) Scheme (£293,500,000 programme costs and £6,500,000 administration costs), related to foot and mouth disease; the take-up of £39,500,000 for Dairy Agrimonetary Compensation and £26,730,000 to fund BSE testing of fallen stock (£24,485,000 programme costs and £2,245,000 administration costs).

The above increases will be offset by savings or charged to the DEL Reserve and will not therefore add to planned total of public expenditure.